The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 151

A day for herself

(Caius)

The door closed behind Sera.

I watched it for a moment before looking back at Isla. She still looked pleased with herself and I already knew that wasn't going to change anytime soon. Not after gefting exactly what she wanted.

"What?"

I looked up.

She was watching me carefully.

"You look like you're thinking too hard."

"I am."

That earned a smile.

The expression seemed to arrive more easily these days. I noticed things like that more often than I used

"I thought we settled this."

"We did."

"Then what's the problem?"

I leaned back slightly in my chair.

"The problem is that you're excited."

She stared at me.

"That's a problem?"

"Usually."

A laugh escaped her.

The sound filled the office and immediately made me regret answering honestly.

“I’m serious.”

“I know.”

That didn’t seen to help my argument.

If anything, it made her more amused.

I looked down at the paperwork on my desk.

None of it was getting read.

A day for heret

Not while she was sitting across from me looking forward to tomorrow like it was some great adventure.

“You’ve never been to the settlement.”

That caught her attention.

“No.”

Her answer came softer than I expected.

I looked at her.

For a moment neither of us spoke.

Then she smiled again.

“My first human settlement.”

“Yes.”

The words seemed to mean something to her.

More than they probably should have.

Then again, maybe they should have.

Most wolves visited the settlement long before reaching adulthood. They grew up seeing it. Shopping there. Walking through the streets with family and friends.

Isla never got any of that.

Ashcrest had taken enough years from her already.

The thought settled badly inside me.

“What is it actually like?” she asked.

I considered the question.

“It’s busy.”

She groaned immediately.

“You already used that answer.”

“Because it’s accurate.”

“It also tells me nothing.”

Fair.

I thought about it for a moment.

Then I tried again.

“There are traders everywhere. Merchants arguing over prices. Wagons moving through the streets from

A day for herect

Sunrise until evening.”

She listened carefully.

“The market square–stays crowded most of the day. People come from smaller communities to trade. Some stay for hours. Some stay for days.”

A small smile appeared on her face.

That seemed to be a better answer.

“What else?”

I should have expected that question.

Curiosity had become one of the most predictable things about her.

“There are food stalls.”

That caught her attention immediately.

“Food stalls?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of food?”

I looked at her.

“I should have known that would be your first question

Her smile widened.

“You didn’t answer it.”

“No.”

She waited.

Unfortunately, she wasn’t going to let it go.

I sighed.

“Fresh bread. Meat pies. Pastries. Roasted meats. Fruit.”

Her expression brightened immediately.

I wasn’t surprised.

“What else?”

I considered the question again.

“Musicians sometimes perform near the market square.”

That caught her attention.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“People just stand there and listen?”

“Usually.”

She looked genuinely interested.

I found myself smiling slightly.

The reaction reminded me how much of the world had been kept from her.

“What else?”

“Artists. Craft stalls. Shops.”

She nodded slowly.

It was obvious she was already building a picture of it in her head.

“You’re making it sound interesting.”

“That wasn’t my intention.”

“It isn’t working.”

A laugh escaped me.

I wasn’t surprised.

At some point this conversation had stopped being about the settlement itself and started becoming something else.

A reminder of all the things she’d never had the chance to experience.

“Do children go there?”

The question caught me off guard.

“Yes.”

Her expression turned thoughtful.

“They just walk around?”

“Usually with their families.”

She nodded slowly.

“As strange as it sounds, I’ve never really seen that.”

The words settled heavily between us.

I knew exactly what she meant.

A day for heredit

She’d seen children in Ashcrest.

She just hadn’t seen them living normal lives.

Not the way they should have been allowed to.

I looked at her.

“You’ll see plenty tomorrow.”

A small smile returned.

“I think I’d like that.”

For a moment neither of us spoke.

Then another question appeared in her eyes before she even opened her mouth.

I saw it coming.

Unfortunately.

“How many questions are you planning to ask before tomorrow?”

She smiled immediately.

“I don’t know.”

“That’s concerning.”

“It should be.”

That earned a laugh from me.

The sound surprised both of us.

Mostly me.

I shook my head.

“You’ve been spending too much time with Sera.”

“Probably.”

The answer came without hesitation.

That only made me laugh again.

I wasn’t sure when exactly she’d become this comfortable.

I wasn’t complaining.

I just noticed it more often lately.

For a while we simply sat there.

The conversation moved from one topic to another without any urgency behind it. No politics. No cour discussions. No old laws waiting to be debated.

Just a conversation.

The kind I never would’ve expected to matter as much as it did.

I leaned back in my chair.

Beyond the office walls, Wraithbone continued moving through its day. Wolves trained, worked, argued, and handled the responsibilities waiting for them.

The territory felt steady around us.

Tomorrow would be different.

Not because of politics.

Not because of the High Council.

Not because of the meetings waiting for me over the next few weeks.

Because Isla was finally doing something simply because she wanted to.

She’d crossed territory borders before.

She’d returned to Ashcrest.

She’d visited Ironfield.

None of those trips had been made for her.

This one was.

The realization settled quietly inside me.

I wasn’t sure why it mattered so much.

Only that it did.

For a while neither of us said anything.

Then she looked toward the window.

“I think I’m excited.”

The admission surprised me.

Not because it was unexpected.

Because she said it so openly.

There had been a time when she would’ve kept something like that to herself.

Now she didn’t.

A day for heredit Hooked at her.

“I know.”

A smile appeared on her face.

“You do?”

“You’ve been talking about the settlement since Sera walked into the office.”

That earned a laugh.

“That’s fair.”

I shook my head once.

The smile on her face never completely disappeared.

Neither did the excitement.

It was there every time she asked another question and every time she imagined something new.

“You know what the worst part is?” I asked.

Her eyebrow lifted.

“What?”

“I already know you’re going to come back with twenty new questions.”

That made her laugh again.

“Only twenty?”

“You’re right.”

I considered it.

“Thirty.”

The look of satisfaction on her face suggested she considered that a compliment.

Maybe it was.

Curiosity wasn’t a flaw.

Not in her.

Not anymore.

For too many years she’d been punished for asking questions. Punished for wanting answers. Punished for wanting more than Ashcrest was willing to give her.

Wraithbone wasn’t Ashcrest.

The difference mattered.

A day for herect

Tomorrow she would walk through a place she’d never seen before.

No politics.

No council meetings.

No expectations.

Just a day that belonged entirely to her.

The thought should have worried me.

Instead it felt right.

I still intended to assign guards.

That wasn't changing.

Neither was the fact that I'd probably spend part of the day wondering if everything was fine.

Some habits took longer to break than others.

But as I looked at her sitting across from me, excited about something as simple as visiting a human settlement for the first time, I couldn't bring myself to regret agreeing.

Not even a little.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 152

The journey begins–1

(Isla)

The next morning I found Sera and Pryor waiting near the entrance.

Three healers stood with them. Two guards waited nearby looking ready to leave. Caius was there too.

That should have warned me.

The moment I reached them, Caius looked at me.

Then he looked at the bag over my shoulder.

Then he looked back at me.

I narrowed my eyes.

“What?”

His expression didn’t change.

“Stay with the group.”

I sighed.

“I will.”

“Good.”

I waited.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t finished.

“If someone starts asking questions about you, let Sera answer them.”

That caught my attention.

“Why?”

“The High Council arrives soon.”

That was fair.

The fewer conversations about the Celestial wolf before the Council meeting, the better.

“I can do that.”

“Good.”

I folded my arms.

“Anything else?”

“Yes.”

Of course there was.

“If someone recognizes you, don’t encourage the conversation.”

I frowned slightly.

“You think that could happen?”

“I think news travels.”

That wasn’t exactly reassuring.

Still, he wasn’t wrong.

More wolves knew about me now than I was comfortable with.

“I’ll be careful.”

His expression relaxed slightly.

That alone told me he’d been thinking about this longer than he wanted to admit,

I looked at him for a moment.

Then I stepped closer.

His eyes narrowed slightly.

“What?”

I smiled.

“You worry too much.”

“I don’t.”

“You do.”

“I don’t.”

Sera immediately looked away.

One of the healers suddenly became very interested in the ground.

Pryor looked like he wanted absolutely no part of this conversation.

I shook my head.

“You do.”

Before he could argue again, I reached up and kissed him.

For a second he seemed surprised.

Then one of his hands settled against my waist.

The journaus!

The bond warmed immediately.

A familiar feeling.

Comforting.

Safe.

When I stepped back, the corner of his mouth lifted slightly.

That was close enough to a smile for him.

“Enjoy yourself.”

The words surprised me.

Not because he meant them.

Because he said them out loud.

“I will.”

“Good.”

Sera cleared her throat dramatically.

“We should probably leave before this turns into a longer goodbye.”

That earned a laugh from one of the healers.

I rolled my eyes. Then I looked around. A few seconds passed. I looked around again. Something felt wrong.

“Where are the horses?”

Sera blinked.

“What horses?”

I stared at her.

“The ones we’re riding.”

Understanding immediately appeared on her face.

Then she started laughing.

I wasn’t sure why.

“I thought we were leaving.”

“We are.”

“Then where are the horses?”

That only made her laugh harder.

The joumey bega

One of the healers turned away to hide a smile.

“We aren’t riding.”

I frowned.

“Then are we shifting?”

“No.”

I looked between all of them.

“Then how are we getting there?”

Sera pointed toward the road.

I followed her hand.

Then I stopped.

Something large and dark was parked nearby.

I stared at it.

For a moment I wasn’t even sure what I was looking at.

“What is that?”

Understanding immediately appeared on Sera’s face.

“You’ve never seen a vehicle before.”

I looked at her.

“That’s a vehicle?”

One of the healers started laughing.

I ignored her.

My attention stayed on the strange metal thing.

It looked enormous.

Far larger than any wagon I’d ever seen.

“People get inside that?”

“Yes.”

I stared a little longer.

“On purpose?”

That started another round of laughter.

The jours begins 1

Hooked at all of them.

“I asked a reasonable question.”

“It was a reasonable question,” Sera said.

Then she ruined it by laughing too,

I looked back at the vehicle.

The thing still didn’t make sense.

“How does it work?”

That earned another round of laughter.

I folded my arms.

Nobody was answering me.

Eventually Sera stepped beside me.

“It has an engine.”

I blinked.

“What’s an engine?”

The laughter immediately got worse.

I wasn’t sure why.

It seemed like a perfectly normal question.

One of the healers attempted to answer.

“It creates power.”

I looked at her.

“How?”

She opened her mouth.

Then closed it again.

Apparently she wasn’t sure how to explain it either.

Sera shook her head.

“We’ll explain later.”

That wasn’t satisfying.

Not even slightly.

Clatry

The journey begins T

Still, I fullowed them toward the vehicle.

The closer I got, the larger it seemed.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 153

The journey begins 2

I wasn’t sure I trusted something that big.

Especially when it apparently moved without horses.

Sera opened one of the doors.

“Get in.”

I looked inside.

The seats looked surprisingly comfortable. That wasn’t what I expected from something made of metal. I leaned closer to get a better look. It still didn’t seem entirely trustworthy.

That felt slightly offensive.

I climbed in carefully.

Then immediately started looking around.

Everything was different.

The seats.

The doors.

The strange controls near the front.

I pointed.

“What does that do?”

“Nothing you’re allowed to touch.”

I pointed somewhere else.

“What about that?”

“No.”

“This?”

“No.”

I frowned.

The vehicle suddenly made a sound.

I jumped.

The healers burst into laughter.

Sera wasn’t much better.

The journeys 2

Hooked around.

“What was that?”

“The vehicle.”

I stared.

“Is something wrong with it?”

“No.”

“Then why is it making that noise?”

That earned another round of laughter.

I was beginning to suspect nobody planned on answering my questions.

The vehicle started moving.

I grabbed the seat immediately.

Sera noticed.

“You know we’re not falling, right?”

“I don’t know that.”

That earned another laugh.

Outside the window, Wraithbone started passing by.

The pack house disappeared behind us.

Then the training grounds.

Then the outer buildings.

I found myself staring.

Everything looked different from inside the vehicle.

The world seemed to move faster.

Trees passed by.

Roads stretched ahead.

The territory rolled beyond the windows.

I couldn’t stop watching.

“How fast are we going?”

One of the guards answered.

The joumerging

“Not very”

That felt concerning.

Because it already seemed fast,

The road stretched into the distance.

Other vehicles appeared occasionally.

Each one earned another question.

Sera eventually stopped trying to answer all of them.

I couldn’t blame her.

There were a lot.

After a while the territory started changing.

Buildings appeared more frequently.

The roads widened.

The number of people increased.

I pressed closer to the window.

“What is that?”

“A shop.”

I pointed again.

“And that?”

“Another shop.”

I pointed a third time.

“What about that one?”

The healer beside me sighed dramatically.

“Also a shop.”

I ignored her.

Everything was new.

Chare

Everything was interesting.

Ashcrest had never prepared me for any of this.

For years my world had been limited to a shack, a chain, and whatever work waited for me each morning.

The journe

Now I was crossing roads! never knew existed.

Seeing things I'd never imagined.

Experiencing things–most wolves probably considered normal.

The thought stayed with me for the rest of the drive.

Then the settlement appeared.

I forgot every other thought immediately.

Buildings stretched in every direction.

People filled the streets.

Vehicles moved constantly.

Voices carried through the air.

Music drifted from somewhere nearby.

I stared through the window.

For a moment I wasn't even sure where to look first.

Sera smiled beside me.

"Welcome to the settlement."

I didn't answer.

I couldn't.

There was too much to see.

The vehicle slowed.

People passed close enough for me to see their faces.

Families.

Children.

Merchants.

Travelers.

The entire world seerned to exist in one place.

Then my attention caught on a single figure.

A man walking through the crowd.

I sat up straighter.

The journey-brain 2

My heart skipped once.

The man turned slightly.

I froze.

For a second he looked exactly like Brent.

The same height.

The same build.

The same hair.

The crowd shifted between us.

Someone stepped in front of him.

Then another.

By the time I found an opening again, he was gone.

I stared at the place where he'd been.

Maybe it wasn't him.

Maybe it was.

I honestly wasn't sure.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 154

Claim between wolf and territory Vorak Scent marking. The way Wraithbone worked. Every new thing in her life since the shack had come through me first, not because I'd planned it that way, but because there had been nobody else positioned to do it

Today there was somebody else

Sera. The healers. A market full of strangers and shops and food stalls and music, none of which belonged to me, none of which I'd be the one explaining

I told myself that was good. It was good. She needed people who wererit me She needed a life that didn't run entirely through the bond and the territory and the politics sitting on my desk if I wanted her to keep becoming whoever she was becoming, I couldn't be the only door she walked through to get there

Knowing that didn't make the morning easier

Pryor cleared his throat. "Cedric's letter," he said. "It needs a response before tonight"

I pulled it toward me and read it properly this time. Confirmation of the alliance terms, formal and plainly worded the way everything from Cedric's hand tended to be A line near the bottom asking whether Goldmere's representatives should arve before the High Council or alongside then, a question that mattered more than its phrasing suggested, since arriving early would say one thing to the eastern tertones and arriving alongside would say another

I wrote before. 1 signed it and handed it back and Pryor took it without comment, though I caught the small shift in his expression that meant he'd noticed exactly how long it had taken me to do something that should have taken thirty seconds

"She'll be fine," he said

"I know, I said

I looked at him. He held my gaze without backing down, the particular steadiness he'd had sincs before i was old enough to hold count without him standing somewhere nearby ready to step in if I needed him, He'd known me longer than almost anyone alive. He didn't need me to explain.

I sent two guards, 1 said

You sent two guards because you wanted to send ten and Sera talked you down

That was accurate enough that i didn't argue with it

I stood and crossed to the window the training yard was below, a handful of wolves wording through dolls in the cold morning wit, the ordinary business of the tentory continuing the way it contingent every day regardless of what i was thinking about Beyond the training yard the road ran sest, the same road the date her taken an hour ago, sady long out of sight we asked a food stalls fret that had been the thing that caught her attention factest when ! described the settlement, more then the music of the croods of the slips Fischfused Acut ples Peers 14 matched her face when sted her and understand, not for the first time, her med st Sedonary life had my never been evilste to her iwed the one watctang her face when she tried something for the first time

That was understood

Claim between wolf and territory. Vorak. Scent marking. The way Wraithbone worked. Every new thing in her life. since the shack had come through me first, not because I'd planned it that way, but because there had been nobody else positioned to do it.

Today there was somebody else.

Sera. The healers. A market full of strangers and shops and food stalls and music, none of which belonged to me, none of which I'd be the one explaining.

I told myself that was good. It was good. She needed people who weren't me. She needed a life that didn't run entirely through the bond and the territory and the politics sitting on my desk. If I wanted her to keep becoming whoever she was becoming, I couldn't be the only door she walked through to get there.

Knowing that didn't make the morning easier.

Pryor cleared his throat. "Cedric's letter," he said. "It needs a response before tonight."

I pulled it toward me and read it properly this time. Confirmation of the alliance terms, formal and plainly worded the way everything from Cedric's hand tended to be. A line near the bottom asking whether Coldmere's representatives should arrive before the High Council or alongside them, a question that mattered more than its phrasing suggested, since arriving early would say one thing to the eastern territories and arriving alongside would say another.

I wrote before. I signed it and handed it back and Pryor took it without comment, though I caught the small shift in his expression that meant he'd noticed exactly how long it had taken me to do something that should have taken thirty seconds.

"She'll be fine," he said.

"I know," I said.

"You don't look like you know."

I looked at him. He held my gaze without backing down, the particular steadiness he'd had since before I was old enough to hold court without him standing somewhere nearby ready to step in if I needed him, He'd known me longer than almost anyone alive. He didn't need me to explain.

"I sent two guards," I said.

"You sent two guards because you wanted to send ten and Sera talked you down."

That was accurate enough that I didn't argue with it.

I stood and crossed to the window. The training yard was below, a handful of wolves working through drills in the cold morning air, the ordinary business of the territory continuing the way it continued every day regardless of what I was thinking about. Beyond the training yard the road ran east, the same road the vehicle had taken an hour ago, already long out of sight.

She'd asked about food stalls first. That had been the thing that caught her attention fastest when ! described the settlement, more than the music or the crowds or the shops. Fresh bread. Meat pies. Pastries. I'd watched her face when I listed them and understood, not for the first time, how much of an ordinary life had simply never been available to her.

I wanted to be the one watching her face when she tried something for the first time.

That was understood

That was selfish. I knew it was selfish even as I thought it. She didn't need me there for the bread to taste Tike bread or the music to sound like music. She was allowed a day that wasn't built around me, around the bond, around the constant orbit of politics and territory and council meetings that had occupied nearly every conversation we'd had since Ashcrest.

Vorak shifted finally.

"You're being ridiculous,' he said.

'I know,' I said.

'She kissed you in front of Pryor and two healers and didn't flinch once,' he said. 'She is not afraid of a market.'

'I know that too,' I said.

'Then sit down and read the report,' he said.

I sat down. I read the report. I made it through two full pages before my attention drifted east again, toward the road, toward a settlement full of strangers who had no idea what was walking among them today.

Pryor set a cup of tea on the desk without being asked.

“You’re going to be unbearable until they’re back,” he said.

“Probably,” I said.

He almost smiled. “I’ll let Sera know to send word if anything happens.”

“Anything specific,” I said, “or anything at all.”

“Anything at all,” he said, already turning back toward the door. “I assumed that was understood.”

I picked up the cup and didn’t drink from it and looked at the reports stacked in front of me, and somewhere east of the territory, in a market full of bread and music and strangers, Isla was seeing the. world for the first time, and I was going to make myself trust that she didn’t need me there to be exactly as capable as she’d always been.

That didn’t mean I stopped watching the road.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 155

This is nice

(Isla)

I kept staring at the spot where he’d been.

Maybe it wasn’t him. Maybe I’d built a whole person out of a stranger’s shoulders and a quick turn of his head.

“You went quiet,” Sera said.

I pulled my eyes from the window. “Did I?”

“You did.” She studied me for a second. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I thought I saw someone I knew.”

Sera's expression shifted slightly. "From Ashcrest?"

I hesitated too long before answering and she caught it.

"Isla."

"It's probably nothing," I said. "I only saw him for a second. The crowd moved."

She held my gaze a moment longer and then let it go.

The vehicle slowed and stopped and the doors opened and the noise of the settlement rushed in all at once, voices and wheels and something sizzling somewhere close by that smelled like nothing I'd ever smelled before. I forgot about the man almost immediately. Almost.

I stepped out onto the street and just stood there.

People moved around me in every direction, none of them looking twice, none of them lowering their heads or stepping aside the way Wraithbone's pack did when I walked through it now. Nobody here knew what I was. Nobody here cared.

"You're staring," one of the healers said, not bothering to look back at me as she said it, already a few steps ahead.

"I'm allowed to stare," I said. "I've never seen this many people in one place."

I'

She didn't answer that. She just kept walking, talking low to the other healer about something on the other side of the street.

Sera fell into step beside me, though she didn't slow down for me either. "Bread first," she said, pointing toward a row of stalls a little further down the street, each one covered with striped fabric that flapped slightly in the wind. "Try to keep up."

"I'm not arguing with that," I said.

We walked and the guards stayed close without crowding me. I could feel Caius without trying, present even from however many miles separated us now.

This is nice wondered what he was doing.

I thought about reaching for him through the mind link just to check, then decided against it. He'd hear it as worry, and I didn't want him spending the rest of the morning thinking I needed rescuing from a bread stall.

The bread stall smelled like nothing I'd smelled in my whole life. The woman behind the stall handed me a piece without being asked and I took it and bit into it and stopped walking entirely.

"Good?" Sera asked, already half turned to say something to one of the healers before I'd even answered.

I didn't get the chance to.

We bought more than we needed. Caius's money sat heavy and unfamiliar in the small pouch he'd given me, and every time I handed some of it over for something new, a part of me kept waiting for someone to tell me I wasn't allowed.

Nobody told me that.

The merchants just took the money and gave me what I'd asked for and moved on to the next person in line.

We moved through the market, stopping at stalls Sera knew, buying supplies for the healers' work and stopping for things that had nothing to do with supplies at all. A woman selling small carved wooden animals let me hold a fox for a long moment before I set it back down.

"Buy it or don't," Sera said, not really looking at it, already checking something off in her head. "We don't have all day."

I looked at the little fox again. Then I handed over the coins before I could talk myself out of it.

Sera didn't react one way or the other. She just nodded once and moved us along, the healers already a few steps ahead, laughing about something I hadn't heard.

We kept walking. Somewhere ahead someone was playing a string instrument, singing low under the noise of the crowd. I slowed down without meaning to.

"Of course she wants to stop for this too," one of the healers said, not quietly enough.

"For a minute," I said, like I needed to justify it.

We stood at the edge of a small gathering while a man played something slow on an instrument I didn't recognize. A child sat down right in the dirt in front of him without anyone telling her to move.

Nobody here was afraid of anything.

People argued over prices and laughed too loud and let their children run ahead of them without watching every second for danger.

I'd never had that.

I had it now, a little, standing in a market that didn't know what I was, listening to a man play music for strangers who tossed him coins because they wanted to.

Vaela stirred inside me, warm and quiet despite everything around her.

This is nice,' she said.

'Yes,' I said. 'It is.

The man finished his song and the small crowd around him scattered, and one of the guards stepped closer behind me without a word, the only one all morning who'd paid me any real attention.

Sera was already walking ahead with the healers, not waiting.

"Ready for more?" she called back, more out of obligation than interest.

I looked around at the street still stretching ahead of us, full of things I hadn't seen yet, and followed because there wasn't really another option.

"Yes," I said, mostly to myself. "I'm ready."

One of the healers laughed at something up ahead and the other one joined in, the sound carrying back toward me without including me in whatever the joke was. I didn't ask what was funny. I'd stopped expecting them to tell me.

I kept walking anyway. The street curved and another row of stalls opened up ahead, fabric and pottery and something that smelled like cinnamon. Vaela was still warm inside me, still quiet, still saying this is nice in a tone that didn't seem to care whether anyone here liked me.

I decided I didn't care either.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 156

Without trying

(Caius)

Pryor had left an hour ago, and the office had gone quiet. I usually liked it quiet. Today it just left more. room for the same thought to circle,

She’s fine. Nothing in the bond said otherwise. I would have felt it if something had gone wrong, the same way I felt everything else about her now, without trying.

It wasn’t enough today.

Vorak finally spoke.

“You’re not actually working.

‘I’m trying.‘

‘You’re failing.‘

‘Then say something useful,‘ I said.

‘Useful would be you remembering she’s not the girl from that shack anymore.

I didn’t answer right away.

‘She’s the one who stood in front of sixty wolves and made them bow without asking for it,’ he said. ‘She doesn’t need us deciding she can’t manage a morning without us there.”

That landed somewhere I didn’t like.

‘I know,‘ I said.

‘Then prove it. Sit still. Stop checking the bond every few minutes like she’s going to vanish from it.‘

I picked up the pen instead of the report, mostly to give my hands something to do.

‘A pen,’ Vorak said. ‘Bold.‘

‘Quiet‘

‘I’m simply noting the effort.”

The fire popped once in the hearth and I glanced toward it without meaning to, grateful for an excuse to look at literally anything else in the room.

‘It’s not going out, Vorak said. ‘You don’t need to manage that too.”

‘I wasn’t going to!’

‘You were considering it.”

I set the pen down again.

Without trying

For a while neither of us said anything. The quiet stretched out, the kind that usually didn’t bother me, Today carrying more weight than it should have.

‘You could speak to her Vorak said eventually. ‘Through the mind link.

‘I’m not interrupting her morning over nothing.”

‘I wasn’t suggesting you interrupt anything. Just reach for the bond. See how she’s doing without saying al word.‘

I thought about that for a moment, then did it.

Warm. Present. Nothing in it forced or strained.

‘See, Vorak said. ‘She’s not worried.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘She isn’t.‘

I picked the report back up, and this time the words actually went in.

The report turned out to be about grain stores along the southern border, the kind of thing that should have taken me ten minutes to read and respond to. I finished it properly this time, made a note in the margin for Pryor, and set it aside for the next one.

The next one was easier than the last. Not because the content was simpler, but because I’d stopped fighting my own attention every few seconds to drag it back to the page. Reaching for the bond had done something the window never managed. It had given me an answer instead of just a question.

I turned the next page and made myself actually read it, and somewhere underneath the words I kept circling back to the same shape of thought, turning it over from a few different angles to see if it held up any better than it had the first time. It didn’t, not really. The conclusion stayed the same no matter which direction I came at it from.

This wasn’t about Isla. It had never been about Isla, not really. It was about me, about a habit built over years of being the only person standing between Wraithbone and whatever threatened it, a habit that had calcified into something I rarely examined because examining it had never been useful before. I’d spent most of my life as the

variable other people accounted for, not the one doing the accounting around someone else's safety.

I' Isla had changed that without either of us deciding it on purpose. She'd simply existed in a way that made every protective instinct I had reorganize itself around her, quietly, without asking permission.

That instinct wasn't wrong. It had kept her alive more than once. But it had limits, the same way every instinct did, and one of those limits was this: she did not need it pointed at a bread stall and a string musician and a woman selling carved foxes.

She needed it pointed at actual threats, the kind that required a king's attention and a king's resources, not a morning she'd been looking forward to since Sera first mentioned it.

I thought about her face when she'd asked about food stalls. The way her whole expression had opened up at the idea of fresh bread and roasted meat and pastries, things most wolves took entirely for granted. things she'd never once had the chance to simply want out loud without bracing for the answer to be no

I thought about the settlement itself, streets I'd walked a hundred times without noticing them, and how today they were going to mean something different to her than they'd ever meant to me.

That mattered more than my own discomfort sitting here.

I picked up the third–report and read through it at a pace that finally felt normal, the way work usually felt when nothing was sitting underneath it demanding separate attention.

Pryor would be back within the hour with whatever he'd gone to handle, and there would be more letters by then, more decisions that actually required me, real ones, the kind that didn't dissolve the moment I checked the bond and found nothing wrong in it

Cedric's response still needed finalizing. The High Council's formal reception would need to be planned in more detail than we'd managed so far, seating, order of address, who stood where when seven wolves who'd spent decades deciding who deserved deference walked into a hall that had already decided who belonged at its center.

There was enough real work waiting for me that spending the morning stewing over a market visit was, by any honest measure, a poor use of a king's time.

I knew that. Knowing it had never been the problem.

The fire had burned low again, and this time I got up and fed it properly, because doing something useful with my hands felt better than sitting here pretending the report required all my attention when it clearly hadn't for the last hour.

I added wood, watched it catch, and stood there a moment longer than necessary, not looking at the window, not looking east, just standing in front of a fire in a quiet office while the rest of my territory continued exactly as it should without requiring anything else from me right now.

When I sat back down, the reports were easier. Not because anything outside had changed.

Because something in me finally had.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 157

That one

(Isla)

The street opened up past the music stall into something wider, more crowded, the kind of section of the market where everything smelled different every few steps. Roasted meat frorn one direction. Something sweet from another. A woman frying flat bread on a griddle right there in the open air, the sound of it loud and satisfying, the smell stopping me completely.

Sera didn't notice for a few seconds. Then she turned back.

"That one?" she said.

"That one," I said.

She didn't argue. Even the healer who'd been muttering about my pace all morning didn't say anything, mostly because she'd already bought two of them herself and was working through the second one while pretending she hadn't.

I handed over the coins and bit into it standing right there on the street and didn't care what any of them thought about it.

It was the best thing I'd eaten in my entire life. I was aware that might not be saying much given the years I'd spent eating whatever was left after everyone else had finished, but I didn't think that was the whole explanation. I thought it was just genuinely that good, hot and crisp at the edges and soft in the middle, with something on top I didn't have a name for that tasted like warmth itself.

Vaela stirred inside me.

‘More,‘ she said.

‘We can’t eat the whole stall,‘ I said.

‘Why not.‘

I didn’t have a good answer for that.

We kept walking. The market stretched further than I’d expected, new sections appearing every time ! thought we’d reached the end of it. Ceramics. Leather goods. A stall selling nothing but different kinds of salt, which seemed strange until Sera stopped and bought four of them without hesitating and I understood that the world contained information I hadn’t had access to yet.

The healers had split off to handle the actual supply run, which meant it was just me and Sera and the two guards moving through the quieter back half of the market at a pace that finally didn’t feel like I was being herded somewhere.

Sera was easier without the others there. Not warm exactly, but less brisk. She pointed things out occasionally, named things I didn’t recognize, answered my questions without the slight edge that had been underneath everything earlier.

I bought a small jar of something amber that the seller said was honey and Sera said was worth it and I took her word for it. I bought a piece of fabric from a woman whose stall smelled like cedar, dark blue and soft enough that I stood there running it through my hands for a full minute before Sera cleared her throat.

That one

“Buy it,” she said.

I bought it.

The afternoon had moved further along than I’d realized, the light shifting in a way that meant we’d need to head back before long. Twas thinking about that, about the drive back and whether I’d manage it better now that the first one had taught me what to expect, when I turned a corner between two stalls and stopped.

The man was ten feet away.

Not glimpsed this time. Not half a face through a moving crowd. He was standing with his back to me at a produce stall, shoulders I recognized, height I recognized, the particular way he held himself that I’d grown up watching from a distance because getting too close had always carried consequences.

He hadn’t seen me yet.

I didn’t move away.

Vaela lifted inside me, not pushing, just present, the way she got present when something significant was in front of us and she wanted me to know she was there.

The man turned his head to say something to the seller and I saw the line of his jaw and the shape of his nose and all of it added up to the same answer it had added up to through the vehicle window.

Brent.

He looked older. Thinner. He wasn’t wearing anything that marked him as Ashcrest, nothing that announced who he was or where he’d come from. He looked like anyone. He looked like someone who had learned to look like anyone.

He paid the seller and turned to leave and his eyes/found me before I said a word.

He went completely still.

I didn’t move. I didn’t lower my eyes. I didn’t do any of the things I would have done a year ago, the making myself smaller, the looking away, the bracing for what came next. I just stood there and looked at him the way I looked at everything now, directly and without apology, and let him see exactly what was standing in front of him.

(*

His face did something complicated.

Not anger. Not the contempt I’d grown up receiving from him without ever understanding what I’d done to earn it. Something else. Something I didn’t have a clean word for yet, closer to the expression Rodan had worn in the holding chamber when the bow came without his permission.

Recognition.

Not of who I’d been.

Of what I was now.

A few seconds passed. Neither of us spoke. The market moved around us like we weren’t there, strangers stepping between us and past us without any understanding of what was happening in the space between two people standing ten feet apart in the middle of a crowd.

Then Brent looked away first.

Charn

He turned and walked into the crowd and disappeared, and I stood there and watched him go and felt Vaela settle back inside me, slow and certain, the particular satisfaction of something that had gone exactly the way it was supposed to go.

Sera appeared at my shoulder.

She looked at the crowd where he'd gone and then at me.

"I'll tell Caius," she said quietly.

"No," I said. "I will."

She held my gaze for a moment. Then she nodded once.

We walked back toward the guards without saying anything else, and I filed it the way I was learning to file things, not pushed away, not avoided, just held clearly and set aside until I was ready to deal with it properly.

The drive back was longer than the drive there, or felt that way. I sat with the blue fabric in my lap and the small jar of honey beside me and watched the territory roll past outside the window and thought about Brent's face when he saw me.

Not the contempt.

The recognition.

Vaela was quiet the whole way home.

That was almost better than anything she could have said.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 158

What I wanted

(Isla)

Caius was at the door when the vehicle pulled up. He wasn't outside waiting, but I knew he'd been watching for us. The moment I stepped out, his eyes found mine. I smiled and held up the jar of honey in one hand and the blue fabric in the others

“Good day?” he asked.

“It was,” I said. “A really good day.”

He opened the door and let me walk in first. Sera came in behind me, stepped close to Caius, whispered something into his ear, and then headed toward the medical wing without another word. I smiled because she’d kept her promise. She’d left the telling to me.

Caius looked at me.

“Come on,” he said.

I followed him upstairs. When we reached our room, I put the honey and the blue fabric on the table before taking the carved fox from my bag and placing it beside them. Caius sat next to me and looked over everything I’d brought home.

“You found more than honey,” he said.

“I did.”

“I want to hear about all of it.”

I smiled.

“From the beginning?”

“From the beginning.”

I laughed.

“Alright. The vehicle was first.”

“What did you think?”

“It was louder than I expected. I grabbed the seat as soon as it started moving.”

“I can picture that.”

“I didn’t even notice I’d done it until Sera laughed.”

“And after that?”

“I got used to it. I’d still rather ride a horse.”

“I thought you might say that.”

What I wanted

“You’ll probably hear me say it again.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

I laughed again before telling him about the rest of the trip. I told him about the market and the little stalls lined along the street. I told him about the woman making flat bread and how Sera bought some for us before we kept walking.

“You liked it?” he asked.

“I did. I wanted another piece before I’d even finished the first.”

“I’ll have to try it.”

“You should.”

I pointed at the honey on the table.

“I bought that after.”

“And the fabric?”

“I saw the color and liked it.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“You bought it anyway.”

“I did.”

He smiled.

“That’s reason enough.”

I smiled back.

“I thought so too.”

I picked up the fabric for a moment before setting it down again.

“I also bought the fox.”

He looked at the carving.

“I noticed.”

“I liked it the moment I saw it.”

“So you brought it home.”

“I did.”

“I’m glad.”

”

What I wanted

“So am I.”

I looked at everything on the table for a moment before turning back to him.

“There was music in the market too. A man was playing while a little child sat nearby. I stayed there for a while just listening.”

“What was that like?” he asked.

“It was different.”

“Different how?”

“No one knew who I was. No one expected anything from me. I could just walk around like everyone else.”

“And you liked that.”

“I did.”

I looked at him for a moment before speaking again.

“There’s something else.”

His eyes stayed on mine.

“What is it?”

“I saw Brent.”

He didn’t interrupt me.

“Where?”

“At the market.”

His face didn’t change, but I knew he understood what that meant.

“He was there?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“I looked right at him.”

He was quiet for a moment.

“What happened?”

“He saw me. We stopped about ten feet from each other. Neither of us spoke.”

I looked at my hands before meeting his eyes again.

“I didn’t look away.”

“And him?”

What I wanted

“You’ll probably hear me say it again.“–

“I don’t doubt it.”

I laughed again before telling him about the rest of the trip. I told him about the market and the little stalls lined along the street. I told him about the woman making flat bread and how Sera bought some for us before we kept walking

“You liked it?” he asked.

“I did. I wanted another piece before I’d even finished the first.”

“I’ll have to try it.”

“You should.”

I pointed at the honey on the table.

“I bought that after.”

“And the fabric?”

“I saw the color and liked it.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“You bought it anyway.”

“I did.”

He smiled.

“That’s reason enough.”

I smiled back.

“I thought so too.”

I picked up the fabric for a moment before setting it down again.

“I also bought the fox.”

He looked at the carving.

“I noticed.”

“I liked it the moment I saw it.”

“So you brought it home.”

“I did.”

“I’m glad.”

What I wanted

“He shouldn’t have been there.”

I frowned.

“The human settlement?‘

He nodded.

“He had no business being there.”

“I thought the same thing.”

“I’ll find out why he was.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to speak to the people responsible for the settlement. If he was there without permission, he won’t be allowed back.”

“And if someone gave him permission?”

“I’ll deal with that too.”

I studied his face.

“So he won’t be going there again?”

“No.”

He answered without hesitation.

“I’ll make sure Brent doesn’t return to the human settlement.”

I believed him.

Not because he was angry.

Because when Caius said he’d take care of something, he always did.

I looked at him and smiled.

“Apart from seeing Brent, I enjoyed myself.”

“I know.”

“I want to go back.”

“You will.”

I shook my head.

“I don’t rnean another visit like today.”

He looked at me.

“I want to go back with you.”

What I wanted

A smile appeared on his face.

“With me?”

“Yes.”

“I’d like that.”

“I could show you the bread stall.”

“The one you’ve been talking about since you got home?”

I laughed.

“Yes.”

“Then I suppose I’ll have to see if it’s as good as you say.”

“It is.”

“And you’ll show me where you bought the honey.”

“And the fabric.”

“And the fox.”

I nodded.

“Everything.”

“Then we’ll go together.”

I moved a little closer.

“I’d like that.”

“So would I.”

He leaned in and kissed me.

I smiled into the kiss and kissed him back. When we pulled away, I stayed close to him, smiling.

“I think you’ll enjoy it.”

“I think I will too.”

He took my hand again.

“We’ll make a day of it.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

“You should.”

I smiled to myself.

What I wanted

The day hadn’t ended with Brent after all.

It ended with plans to go back.

Next time, Caius would be with me.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 159

The only way forward

(Isla)

I woke because of the heat

Clair

Not a dream. Not a noise. The heat, arriving all at once the way it had before, except nothing about this was like before. Before it had been warmth moving beneath my skin, something I could breathe through. Before, it had been manageable.

This was not manageable.

It started in my chest and spread outward in every direction at the same time, not warmth, fire, pressing against the inside of my skin like something trying to get out. I sat up and the movement made it worse and I made a sound I didn't recognize as mine, something raw and broken, and then I was reaching for Caius before I'd finished deciding to.

My hand found his arm and he was awake before I'd gripped it properly, awake and upright and already turning toward me, and the moment his hands found my face the heat pulled back one fraction, just enough to breathe, just enough to understand how bad it had been a second before.

"Isla." His voice was careful. Fully on me.

"It's Vaela," I said. "But not like before. Not like any of the other times."

It wasn't the bond. I knew what the bond felt like now, warm and certain and mine. I knew what Vaela felt like too, her presence, her weight, the way she moved inside me when something required her attention. This was different. This was Vaela past the point of patience, pressing against the inside of me with the urgency of something overdue that had finally become critical.

I was crying without knowing when I'd started.

Not from pain exactly. From the overwhelm of it, from the force of something I'd felt build slowly over months arriving all at once with nowhere to go. Vaela was not calm. She was as close to frantic as I'd feit her since the first shift, not with fear but with demand, like a door she had been pressing against had finally reached the point of breaking.

Caius didn't tell me to breathe. He didn't say it would be fine. He pulled me against him and held me there and I felt his jaw against the top of my head and his arms around me and the heat pulled back one fraction, enough that I could feel the difference between my skin and the air around it again.

Then I felt something happen to him.

A sound from him, low and involuntary, his arms tightening around me in a way that wasn't comfort anymore. Vorak, responding to Vaela's distress through the bond, through the scent marking, through. everything that had been building between all four of us. I felt what it was costing him in the tension across his shoulders and in his breathing.

"Caius," I said

"I know," he said. His voice was rough in a way it hadn't been a moment ago.

He was holding it. Holding Vorak, holding himself, holding me at the same time.

The only way forward pressed my face against his chest and he sent the mind link without letting go of me, I felt it move through the bond, brief and urgent, Sera's name in it.

We stayed like that.

The heat came in waves now, rising until I thought I couldn't bear another second before easing just enough for me to breathe. Every time it retreated I found myself waiting for it to return. Vaela had gone quiet in the way she always did when words were no longer enough.

I was still crying, though quieter now, the kind of crying that happened after the worst of something had passed and the body needed somewhere to put what it had just been through.

Caius said nothing. We stayed exactly where we were, holding each other without speaking. Time seemed to slow until the moment belonged only to us.

When Sera came in she took one look at both of us and didn't say anything for a moment. She crossed to the bed and sat on the edge of it and looked at me carefully.

"How long?" she said.

"Not long," Caius said. "Minutes."

She nodded. She looked at him next and something passed between them. Then she looked back at me.

"The previous heats," she said. "Were any of them this bad?"

"Nothing like this," I said. "Before it came and went. This didn't feel like it was going to stop."

Sera nodded slowly.

"And Vaela?" she said.

"Frantic," I said. "Not afraid. Like something has been building too long and tonight it ran out of room."

She was quiet for a moment. Then she looked between us, taking us both in together.

"This is the bond," she said. "Not the mate bond the way you've been feeling it. The deeper part of it. The part that completes."

"I know what it is," I said. "I've known it was coming. I just didn't know it would feel like/this."

“Celestial wolves don’t carry this the way ordinary wolves do,” she said. “It builds differently. It holds longer. And when it reaches a certain point it stops being something either of you can manage with proximity or scent marking or anything short of the thing itself.”

No one answered immediately.

“The mating,” I said. Not a question this time.

“And the mark,” Sera said. “Together. That’s the only thing that resolves this now.” She paused. “Your body has been telling you for a while. Tonight it stopped asking.”

I looked at Caius.

He looked back at me and his expression was everything he wasn’t saying out loud, the restraint of weeks

The only way forward

Clair of rules, the waiting, the particular patience of a man who had decided my timeline was the only timeline That mattered and had held to that without once making me feel the cost of it.

Vaela moved inside me

Not frantic anymore.

Certain.

‘You already know,‘ she said.

I did.

I had known since the morning I woke up and simply knew, the same way Vaela knew things before I had words for them. I’d been waiting for the right moment, not from fear, from wanting it to be mine completely, unchased by heat or urgency or anything external.

Tonight the heat had taken that option away.

I looked at Sera.

“Thank you,” I said.

She stood from the bed and moved toward the door without ceremony. At the threshold she paused.

“Don’t wait too long,” she said simply.

The door clicked shut behind her, leaving Caius and me alone.

What was coming

Clum

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 160

What was coming

(Caius)

I’d known something like this was coming. Not tonight specifically. But I’d known since Sera came to my office and told me what Isla had described, since I’d watched small things shift in her over time and felt something change in the bond without being able to name it clearly. What I hadn’t known was what it would feel like when it finally arrived. What Vorak would do with it. What it would cost me to hold him through it.

That part I hadn’t been prepared for.

Isla was still beside me. Her breathing had settled. The crying had stopped. She looked at her hands for a moment before she looked back at me.

“I already knew,” she said. “Before tonight. I’ve known for a while.”

“I know,” I said.

She looked at me. “You felt it?” she asked.

“Something,” I said. “Not like tonight. Tonight was different.”

She nodded once. The fire had burned low and the room was darker than it had been when Sera arrived. Neither of us moved to fix it. The dark felt right for this, for sitting in the quiet of what had just happened without needing to see it too clearly yet.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

The question caught me slightly. She was asking about me. After what she’d just been through, after the heat and the crying and Sera sitting at the edge of the bed delivering

the only answer that would fix it, she was asking about me. That was Isla. It had always been Isla, even before she'd fully understood who she was becoming.

"Yes," I said.

She held my gaze for a moment like she was checking. Then she seemed satisfied and looked toward the window.

"Vorak," she said.

"He's fine," I said. "He held."

"I felt him," she said. "Through the bond. When it got bad."

"I know," I said. "He felt you too. That's what made it harder."

She looked at me at that. Something moved through her expression, not guilt, understanding. She reached for my hand without saying anything and I let her take it and we sat like that for a moment, the bond warm between us, neither of us needing to add anything to what had already been said.

She was quiet after that. Not uncomfortable quiet. The kind that came after something significant had passed and neither of us needed to fill it with anything. I let it sit.

What was comming

After a while she asked, "Do you remember what I asked you?"

I looked at her.

"What it would be like," she said. "To have sex with the Alpha King. I told you I wasn't asking for that night. That I was asking because one day I might want it."

"I remember," I said.

"That day is coming," she said. "I want it to be without the heat in the room. Without anything pushing it. Just me choosing it the way I've chosen everything else."

The room went very still around that.

Not because it was dramatic! Because it was simple and certain and completely hers, said the same way she said everything that mattered, without dressing it up or making it more than it was.

"Alright," I said.

She looked at me. “You’re sure?” she asked.

“You just told me you want it,” I said. “That’s enough for tonight.”

Something moved through her expression. Then she leaned into me, not carefully, just fully. I put my arm around her and she settled against my side and the bond warmed between us the way it always did when she stopped holding any part of herself back.

Vorak went quiet inside me. Not the quiet of restraint. The quiet of a wolf who had waited long enough to know one more night was nothing.

I thought about the morning. Not in detail. Just the fact of it. Everything she had said from the beginning, the rules, the timeline, the particular certainty of a woman who had spent years having things decided for her and had decided she was done with that, had been building toward this. Toward her saying what she’d just said without fear in it. Without anything in it except wanting.

That was everything.

Neither of us spoke again.

The fire went out sometime before she fell asleep. I didn’t get up to rebuild it. The room was warm enough and she was close enough and the bond between us carried its own warmth that had nothing to do with any fire.

After a while her breathing changed and she was asleep. I stayed where I was with the bond between us and the fire out and what was coming already decided.

I thought about the question she’d asked me that night.

What would it be like.

I hadn’t answered her fully then. I’d given her honesty but not everything, because everything would have been too much for a room still held together by rules and distance and the careful space two people kept between themselves when they both understood what was there but weren’t ready to close the gap yet.

What was conting

She’d know soon enough.

So would I.

I closed my eyes.

The bond carried her to me even in sleep, warm and present and entirely without the reaching quality it had carried for weeks. It had settled into something that knew where it was going and was no longer straining toward it.

Vorak didn’t speak.

Neither did I.

The night had nothing left to ask of either of us.

The darkness before dawn has a particular quality. Heavier than midnight but different from sleep. I felt it shift sometime before the first light touched the window. Isla didn’t stir. The bond didn’t change.

Only the night did, slowly giving way the way it always did, indifferent to what it was leaving behind. I watched the dark thin at the edges and let it come.

I had held myself back from her for longer than she knew. Not just since the bond. Before that. Since the first momerit I understood what she was and chose to let her come to it herself. That patience had cost me something. Watching the light come, I decided it had been worth it.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 161

Nothing left to hold at–1

(Isla)

If someone had told me a year ago that I would wake one morning looking forward to mating the Alpha King, I would’ve assumed they’d mistaken me for someone else.

I turned and looked at his sleeping form and thanked the goddess for giving him to me.

I wouldn’t have been ready to claim another life back then.

I’d barely known how to hold on to my own.

Meeting Caius hadn’t changed everything overnight. He hadn’t rescued me with grand promises or impossible declarations. He’d simply stayed. Day after day. Choice after choice. He’d given me space when I needed it, stood beside me when I couldn’t stand alone, and believed in me long before I knew how to believe in myself.

Somewhere along the way, without either of us noticing exactly when, he'd become my home.

He stirred a little before opening his eyes. I didn't look away from him, I simply stared at what was mine. Fully mine.

His eyes met mine almost instantly.

For a moment neither of us spoke.

We simply looked at each other.

The bond was calm again, warm and familiar, the unbearable ache from the night before finally gone.

"Good morning," he said softly.

"Good morning."

"You look happy."

"I am."

His thumb brushed lightly across my hand.

"I like seeing that."

"So do I."

"Today is the day, are you still ready?" he asked.

I smiled.

"I've never been more ready."

His gaze searched mine, not because he doubted me, but because he wanted to be absolutely certain.

"You know we don't have to," he said quietly. "Not today. Not because of last night."

Nothing left to held at–1

"know."

"If you've changed your mind..."

“I haven’t.”

I squeezed his hand gently.

“I told you yesterday that today would be our day.”

“You did.”

“And I meant every word.”

The tension I’d missed until then left his face, replaced by the small smile I loved seeing.

“Let’s get ready then. Shower first, then food. You have to eat a lot to keep your energy up because mating and marking each other might take longer than either of us expects.”

I laughed.

“You’ve thought about this.”

“I’ve had time.”

“Should I be worried?”

A quiet laugh escaped him.

“No.”

“That didn’t sound convincing.”

“It wasn’t meant to.”

I rolled my eyes and pushed lightly against his shoulder.

“I was beginning to think you were trying to calm me down.”

“I am.”

“It’s not working.”

He smiled.

“Are you nervous?”

“A little.”

“Good.”

I frowned.

“Good?”

“It means this still matters.”

I’

Nothing left to hold at–1 couldn’t argue with that.

We showered separately.

I dressed simply and went out.

Caius was already at the small table near the window with food waiting. He looked up when I came out and something moved through his expression that he didn’t try to contain.

We ate.

Not quickly. Not with the particular focused efficiency of two people trying to get through a meal to reach something else. We ate the way we’d learned to eat together, without needing to fill every silence. He gave me the last of the bread without asking if I wanted it. I took it without thanking him because we were past the point where small things required acknowledgment.

When we were done he looked at me across the table.

I looked back.

Neither of us said anything for a moment. The bond was warm between us, present and easy, nothing reaching in it, nothing straining. Just there.

I stood up first.

He stood with me.

I crossed to him and stopped in front of him and looked up at him the way I’d looked at him that first morning when I’d asked him what sex with the Alpha King would feel like and watched something behind his eyes go very careful very quickly. He wasn’t being careful now. He was just looking at me. All of him present and none of it managed.

I reached for the front of his shirt.

He let me.

I walked him back toward the bed without hurry, without agenda, just moving because that was the direction we were going and the direction felt right. When the backs of his knees found the edge of the bed he sat and I stood between his knees and looked at him from above for once, which was new, and something about the newness of it settled something in me.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 163

Nothing left to hold at–2

He reached up and tocked my hair back from my face. I turned into his hand slightly without thinking about it

“We go at your pace,” he said. “The same as everything.”

“I know,” I said.

I leaned down and kissed him.

This one was different from the others. Not in technique or pressure. Different in what it carried. Every other kiss between us had held something back, some awareness of the line, some management of how far and how much. This one didn’t hold anything back because there was no line left to hold at.

He kissed me back and I felt Vaela stir and then go quiet, holding herself back, giving this to me first.

I appreciated it more than she knew.

His hands moved to my waist and I let him and the bond opened between us, fuller than I’d felt it since the scent marking, fuller than anything, like a door that had been slightly open for weeks had finally been pushed all the way open.

1 let him pull me down onto the bed, my body pressed against his. Our lips met again, more urgent this time, and I felt his hands sliding under my shirt, exploring the bare skin of my back.

I shivered at his touch, but not from fear or nerves. This was different. This was right.

We took our time undressing each other, savoring every moment, every touch. When we were finally naked together, I looked at him and saw nothing but love and desire in his eyes.

He kissed me again, softly at first, then with more passion. I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him closer, wanting to feel every inch of him against me.

His body looked so good. I traced my fingers down his chest, feeling the hard lines of muscle beneath his skin. He shivered at my touch, and I smiled.

“You’re beautiful,” I whispered.

He pulled me closer, his hands roaming over my body. “So are you.”

We kissed again, our bodies pressed together. I could feel his arousal growing, and it made me want him even more.

I rolled onto my back, pulling him on top of me. He looked down at me, his eyes dark with desire. I wasn’t waiting anymore.

He entered me slowly, gently, and I gasped at the sensation. This was my first time having sex and it was more than I could have imagined.

We moved together, our bodies and souls becoming one. It was the most intimate experience of my life

Lwrapped my legs around him, pulling him closer, wanting to feel every inch of him inside me

He kissed me again, his lips soft and gentle against mine. I could feel the bond between us growing stronger with every touch every movement.

We stayed wrapped up in each other, time slipping away until neither of us knew how long it had been When we finally reached that moment together, it was unlike anything I’d ever felt. It wasn’t just my heart anymore. It felt like every part of me belanged with him.

“Mark me Calus, make me yours.”

He leaned down and pressed his lips to my neck just below my ear. I felt his teeth graze my skin and then he bit down harder than I expected but not enough to hurt me.

A gasp escaped me as pleasure and pain mingled in a way that made me want more.

He sucked the wound gently and I felt a rush of power flow between us as he marked me as his mate

When he pulled away I looked up at him and saw tears in his eyes.

“You’re mine,” he whispered.

“I’m yours,” I replied knowing that it was true.

He rolled onto his back and pulled me on top of him exposing his neck to me.

“Mark me Isla, make me yours,” he said his voice filled with emotion.

Without hesitation I leaned down and sank my teeth into his neck marking him as mine forever.

Our bond surged between us stronger than ever before and I felt Vaela stir within me eager to take control

Vorak was there too powerful and dominant ready to claim what was his.

We lost ourselves in each other our wolves taking over as we mated for the first time as true mates.

Time seemed to lose all meaning until there was only the two of us together.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 164

The moming after

(Calus)

I woke before her

The room stopped me before I’d fully sat up.

The window was gone, not cracked, gone, glass across the floor in pieces. Two chairs had shifted several feet from where they’d been. A shelf had come clean off the wall, everything on it scattered across the floor. Burn marks darkened the stone around the hearth and the fire was still burning as if it had always been there

The mirror above the mantle was in two clean pieces.

Cracks ran across the ceiling.

I lay still and felt the bond.

Complete. Nothing straining in it, nothing reaching..

Vorak was quiet.

Not the restless quiet of restraint. The quiet of something finished.

Isla stirred beside me.

She opened her eyes and looked at the ceiling and then at me and something in her face was different from yesterday and every day before that.

“Good morning,” I said.

She looked at the window that wasn’t there anymore. Then at the shelf on the floor. Then at the burn marks around the hearth.

“Caius,” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

“What happened to the room?”

I looked at the ceiling cracks. “Vorak and Vaela.”

She sat up and looked around properly. The chairs. The mirror. The glass. The cracks running across the ceiling.

“They did all of this?” she said.

“Apparently,” I said

She turned back to me with a look I hadn’t seen from her before.

“I’m proud of them,” she said, laughing. Then she shifted slightly and her expression changed. “Hopefully!

can still walk

Hooked at her

“Can you?” I asked.

“Ask me again in a minute, she said.

She looked at the ceiling for a long moment. Then back at me.

“We’re going to need a new window,” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

“And a mirror.”

“Yes”

“And that shelf needs to go back up.”

“Also yes.

She looked at the burn marks around the hearth. “Is the fire still going?”

“Yes,” I said. “It hasn’t stopped since last night.”

She stared at it for a moment. “Without wood.”

“Without wood,” I said.

She looked at me.

The bond completed. The rest was a consequence.”

She laughed once, the kind that came without warning. It moved through the bond between us and settled into the completed version of it, warm and certain.

She looked at me after a moment.

“The High Council,” she said. “Now that we’ve mated. What does that change?”

I looked at the ceiling cracks for a second before looking back at her.

“Everything they were coming to pressure us about is already done,” I said. “The mark. The mating. The bond is complete. There’s nothing left for them to use as leverage.”

“So Sorin has no argument,” she said.

“He still has opinions,” I said. “He’ll always have opinions. But his position was that the unmarked bond created instability. That argument is gone.”

“And Halvon?”

“Halvon wanted uncertainty,” I said. “There isn’t any left,”

She was quiet for a moment looking at the room around her

“So they’re coming to a conversation that’s already been decided,” she said.

“Yes” I said. “The same way Caden said they were arriving too late

She almost smiled at that

“Good,” she said.

She looked around the room again then back at me.

I reached through the mind link and sent word to one of the household staff to come to the corridor and wait. Then to Zeron to arrange someone for the furniture and the window.

I looked at her

“Can you walk yet?” I asked.

She shifted slightly and made a face that answered before she did

“Shower,” I said. “I’ll help.”

She looked at me.

“You’re offering to shower with me,” she said.

“I’m offering to make sure you don’t fall,” I said.

“That’s the same thing.”

“It is,” I said.

She looked at me for another moment and then she didn’t argue, which told me everything I needed to know about how her legs were doing.

I got up and helped her to the bathroom and when the staff knocked at the corridor I called out that they could begin on the room.

When we stepped back into the bedroom, the difference was immediate.

The broken glass was gone.

The shattered mirror had been removed, the empty space above the mantle looking strangely bare. Fresh sheets covered the bed, and someone had swept away every trace of what had happened during the night except for the missing window, now covered with heavy canvas to keep the morning air out.

A young servant bowed the moment he saw us.

“Your Majesties,” he said. “The glazier has already been sent for. The replacement should be finished before sunset.”

I nodded once.

“Thank y you

He bowed again before quietly leaving the room

Isla looked around and smiled.

They work quickly

They’ve had plenty of practice repairing things after Vorak.”

She laughed

“I’m starting to think Vorak has a reputation.”

“He does.”

“For destroying rooms?”

“For keeping the builders around the pack house busy.”

She laughed again.

“I almost feel sorry for them.”

“I don’t.”

“You don’t?”

“They’ll complain while they work, then tell the story for years afterward.”

She smiled and slipped her hand into mine.

“What now?”

“Breakfast.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

“You’ll need it.”

She looked at me.

“I suppose I will.”

I looked toward the corridor.

“We’re not going downstairs.”

Isla looked at me.

“I can.”

“I know you can.”

“Then why aren’t we?”

“Because you’ve just completed the bond.” I reached through the mind link for one of the kitchen staff.

“Breakfast will be brought here.”

She smiled

“You’re worrying too much.”

3–am

Calus

“You need to eat

A few moments later there was a knock at the door.

“Come in

Two servants entered carrying trays, setting them carefully on the table before bowing.

“Your Majesties.”

They left as quietly as they’d arrived.

I picked up one of the trays and carried it to the bed.

“You’re eating here.”

She looked at me, amusement dancing in her eyes.

“I don’t suppose I have much choice.”

“No.” I said. “You really don’t.”

She shook her head, still smiling, and accepted the tray.

I sat beside her with my own.

For a few minutes neither of us spoke.

The completed bond settled quietly between us. It didn’t ask for anything anymore. It was simply there.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 165

The inquiry

(Calus)

After breakfast Isla fell asleep once more which gave me enough time to deal with what I’d been putting off since yesterday

I sat at the small desk and reached for Pryor through the mind link. He was there immediately

1 need a quiet inquiry sent to the border watch,’ I told him. ‘Ashcrest exile movements. Anything within range of the human settlement or the southern road. Nothing official. Word back to me directly

How long has this been a concern? he asked.

Since the settlement visit, I said.

Til have word back before evening,‘ he said.

Keep it quiet,‘ I said. ‘Not today.”

‘Understood.

The mind link closed.

I sat back and thought about what Isla had told me. She’d seen Brent. Held his gaze. He’d looked away first and walked into the crowd.

He hadn’t approached her.

That detail mattered but it wasn’t the detail that was sitting heaviest in me right now.

Brent shouldn’t have been there at all.

He’d been taken under royal guard after the hearing, his sentence pending, direct harm confirmed in his own words in front of the entire hall. He wasn’t supposed to be anywhere except a cell. He certainly wasn’t supposed to be walking freely through a human settlement within range of Wraithbone’s border.

For him to be there someone had to have helped him get out.

Not someone from Ashcrest. Not one of Rodan’s people, who were all either in confinement themselves or under heavy escort when we left. Someone with access to where Brent was being held. Someone who knew the details of his confinement well enough to move him without drawing attention.

Someone inside Wraithbone.

I thought about the royal guards assigned to Brent’s transport. I’d chosen them myself, the way I chose everything that touched a prisoner of that significance. They were experienced, reliable wolves who had served under me long enough that I didn’t question their loyalty when I handed them an assignment.

But the mate bond was not something reliability accounted for.

I had felt it myself, the day I walked through the door of a shack and it hit me before I’d even seen her face. The bond didn’t ask permission. It didn’t consider timing or consequence or the position it was about to put someone in. It simply arrived and rearranged everything around itself whether you were ready for it or not

If one of those guards had encountered Brent and felt the bond, the choice she’d been faced with wasn’t a simple one. Report it–and watch her mate go back into a cell pending an outcome that wasn’t going to be favorable. Or do something about it quietly and hope nobody noticed until it was too late to matter.

She’d chosen the second option.

I couldn’t say I didn’t understand why

That didn’t change what it meant. A royal guard had breached her post. Brent was free when he shouldn’t be. And somewhere between that decision and Isla standing in a market holding her ground while her brother looked away first, a thread had been pulled that connected back to someone still inside these walls

I reached for Pryor again.

The inquiry about exile movements,‘ I said. ‘Add something to it. I want a quiet account of the royal guards assigned to Brent’s transport after the hearing. Who they were. Where they are now. Whether any of them have shown anything unusual since we returned.’

A pause.

You think the escape was assisted, Pryor said.

I think Brent being in that settlement is impossible without inside help, I said. ‘And the only people with that kind of access were royal guards.

Another pause.

I’ll be careful about it, Pryor said.

‘Good, I said. ‘Nobody outside of you and me knows this line of inquiry exists. Not yet.”

‘Understood, he said.

The mind link closed again.

I sat at the desk for a while longer and looked at the covered window and thought about the bond and what it did to a wolf who wasn’t prepared for it. I thought about the guard who had stood at a cell door and felt something arrive that she hadn’t asked for and made a decision in that moment that had consequences far beyond what she could have fully calculated.

Brent was in that market when he had no business being there.

The mate bond had gotten him out of a cell. What he did with that freedom was the question that mattered now and I wouldn’t have an answer until Pryor came back to me before evening with whatever the border watch had found.

Vorak stirred

She’s still asleep, he said.

I know, I said.

Then come back to bed, he said. ‘You’ve done what you can for now!

He was right. The inquiry was sent. Pryor would handle it with the discretion he’d been handling things for fifteen years. There was nothing more I could do until evening and sitting at a desk going over the same thoughts wasn’t going to move anything forward.

I got up and crossed the room and lay down beside her.

The bond settled warm between us, complete and certain, and outside Wraithbone moved through its morning carrying something new in it that hadn't been there the day before.

The border could wait until evening.

princess jody

I realized that I wrote Rodan's pov wrong so I went back and edited it. He was supposed to be exhiled and executed not roaming freely in the woods. I am going to go through this story and edit as much as I can to get everything corrected.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 166

Not reaching anymore

(Isla)

I woke to quiet.

Not the quiet of early morning when the pack house hadn't started yet. The quiet of midday, full and warm, the kind that meant the world had been going about its business for hours without needing anything from

Caius was beside me.

Not asleep. Lying on his back looking at the ceiling the way he looked at things he was thinking about without wanting to think about them. He turned his head when he felt me wake, the bond carrying it before I'd moved or made a sound.

"How long was I asleep?" I asked.

"Long enough," he said.

I looked at the covered window. The line of light along the edge of the canvas was different from this morning, higher, the sun having moved. I'd slept through most of the day.

I sat up slowly.

My body felt different. Not sore exactly, though there was some of that too, more like something had settled inside me that had been restless for a long time, The bond was warm and present and entirely without the reaching quality it had carried for weeks. Vaela was quiet inside me, not absent, just content in a way I was still getting used to feeling from her.

“I want to go outside,” I said.

Caius looked at me.

“You just woke up,” he said.

“I know,” I said. “I still want to go outside.”

He held my gaze for a moment. I could feel him working through the same calculation he’d been working through all morning, weighing what he wanted against what I was asking for, and I let him work through it without pushing because I understood by now that the working through was part of how he operated and rushing it didn’t help either of us.

“Food first,” he said.

“Fine,” I said. “Food first.”

He reached through the mind link and I felt it go, brief and directed, someone in the kitchen receiving it. I watched his face while he did it, the small shift that happened when he used the mind link, the slight focus that came and went in a second.

“You do that so easily, I said

He looked at me. “Do what?”

“The mind link,” I said. “It looks like nothing to you.”

“It’s been twenty years he said

“I’ve had Vaela for less than that, said. “It still feels like something when I use it.”

“It will stop feeling like something,” he said. “Eventually it becomes the same as speaking out loud. You stop noticing the difference”

I thought about that. I was still at the stage where using the mind link required intention, a conscious reaching rather than an automatic one. The idea that it would one day be as simple as talking felt far away but not impossible.

Food arrived quickly, brought by a young wolf who kept her eyes down and said Your Majesties without looking at either of us directly and left as quietly as she'd come. I watched the door close behind her

"They all know," I said.

"Yes," Caius said.

"How?"

"The pack bond," he said. "It runs between every wolf in the territory. When something significant happens they feel it before anyone says a word."

I looked at the food and then at the covered window and then at my hands in my lap. The mark was on my neck, I could feel it the way I could feel Vaela, a presence that hadn't been there before, settled and certain.

We ate without talking much. That was one of the things I'd come to appreciate about meals with him, the absence of the need to fill them. The room was quiet and neither of us needed it to be anything else.

When we were done he looked at me.

"Outside," I said before he could offer an alternative.

Something moved through his expression that was almost amusement. He stood and I stood with him and he held out his hand and I took it the way I took things now, without the pause that used to live between wanting and allowing myself to have.

I let go long enough to find clothes and pull them on. Nothing elaborate. Whatever was closest. Then I took his hand again and we went downstairs.

The pack house felt different as we moved through it. Not in any way I could have described precisely, just different, the way a familiar room felt different after something significant had happened inside it. Pack members we passed lowered their heads, not quickly and then back up the way they did when I was simply the Alpha King's mate moving through their space. Slowly, fully, holding it.

I felt Vaela lift inside me in response,

We stepped outside.

The cold hit me first, clean and immediate, the kind of cold that came in the afternoon when the sun had moved past its highest point and the air had started to think about evening. I stood on the steps and breathed it in and felt the territory reach for me the way it had reached for me since the first time 1 crossed its border.

Except it wasn't the same.

Before it had been a recognition, something in the land lifting toward me, curious and certain, the way a wolf lifted its head toward something it already knew. This was different. This was deeper. This was the territory not reaching toward me but simply including me, the way it included the trees and the ground and everything else that belonged to it fully and permanently.

I stood very still and let it settle around me.

Caius was beside me, his hand still around mine, watching my face the way he watched things that mattered to him.

"It's different," I said.

"Yes," he said.

"It's not reaching anymore," I said. "It's just there."

"Yes," he said again.

I looked out across the grounds. Wolves moving through their afternoon, training, working, crossing from one part of the territory to another. A few of them glanced toward the steps and lowered their heads without breaking their stride, the acknowledgment easy and certain, nothing uncertain in it.

Vaela moved inside me, slow and warm.

There, she said.

It was the same word she'd said last night and it meant something different now, not the completion of the mating but something longer than that, something that didn't have an end point the way last night had. Just the ongoing fact of belonging somewhere completely.

I leaned into Caius slightly.

He didn't make anything of it. He just stood beside me while the territory settled around us both and the afternoon moved toward evening and Wraithbone went about its day the way it always had, except that something in it was different now and every wolf on the grounds could feel it even if none of them could have put words to exactly what had changed.

I could.

I just didn't need to say it out loud.

Commente

LUCK DHAW

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 167

The only choice

(Calus)

Pryor found me in the corridor just before evening.

Not through the mind link. In person, which meant whatever he had to say he didn't want carried through the pack bond even in pieces. I read that before he said a word and turned back toward the office without needing to be asked

He closed the door behind him.

Pryor set a folded document on the desk. I opened it and read through the names. Six royal guards assigned to Brent's transport and initial confinement. Five of them accounted for, still on rotation, nothing unusual noted. The sixth name had a single line beside it.

Resigned her post four days after returning from Ashcrest. Left Wraithbone without giving notice or reason.

I looked at the name.

Dara. Twenty six. Three years in the royal guard. Clean record, no complaints, no incidents in her entire time under my command.

Gone four days after transporting Brent.

"She resigned," I said.

"Without explanation," Pryor said. "The guard captain noted it as unusual but didn't flag it because resignation isn't a breach on its own."

"It is when it follows a prisoner transport," I said.

"Yes," Pryor said. "In hindsight."

I set the document down,

“She felt the bond,” I said.

Pryor was quiet for a moment. “That would explain the timing,” he said.

“It explains all of it,” I said. “She transported him, felt the bond, and couldn’t leave him in a cell. So she got him out and then left before anyone connected the two things.”

“She didn’t expect anyone to connect them,” Pryor said. “A resignation and a missing prisoner are separate incidents unless someone is looking for the thread between them.”

“Which nobody was,” I said. “Until the settlement.”

Pryor nodded once.

I thought about Dara. Twenty six years old, three clean years in the royal guard, a life she’d built inside Wraithbone’s structure, and she’d walked away from all of it because the band arrived without asking her permission and she’d made the only choice that felt possible in the moment she was standing in.

Lunderstood that more than I wanted to admit out loud.

“Where is she now?” I asked.

“Unknown” Pryor said “She left no forwarding information. Her quarters were cleared out.”

“She’s with him,” I said.

“Most likely,” Pryor said.

1 stood and crossed to the window and looked out at the grounds. The evening was corning in properly now, the light changing, pack members moving inside or settling into the quiet routines of the later hours. Isla was somewhere in the pack house, she’d come back inside before me.

“I need to tell Isla,” I said.

“Tonight?” Pryor asked.

“She should have heard about Brent before now,” I said. “I kept it from her yesterday because of the timing. I won’t keep it from her again.”

Pryor didn’t argue with that. He never argued with decisions he agreed with.

“What do you want done about Dara?” he asked.

I thought about it. A former royal guard who had breached her post and helped a prisoner escape. The correct response by any standard I had ever applied to conduct like this was clear. She'd compromised the integrity of the guard. She'd freed a man whose sentence was still pending for direct harm.

But she'd done it because the bond arrived and she hadn't been prepared for it.

"Find her," I said. "Quietly. I want to know where she is and what she's been doing since she left. Nothing beyond that until I've spoken to Isla."

Pryor nodded. "And Brent?"

"Same," I said, "Location confirmed. Nothing else moves until I know what Isla wants."

That stopped Pryor for just a fraction of a second. Not surprise exactly. Something closer to approval, which he would never say out loud and didn't need to.

"I'll have more information within a few days," he said.

"Good," I said. "That's all for tonight."

He picked up the document from the desk and left, pulling the door closed behind him.

I stood at the window for a while after he'd gone.

Dara and Brent in the settlement, or somewhere near it, building something out of a situation neither of them had chosen and both of them were now fully inside. Brent who had stood in the Ashcrest hall and said I did it without excuse or deflection, the words stripped clean before they could form into something more manageable. Brent who had looked at Isla in that market and looked away first

I didn't know what to do with him yet.

The haren he'd done was real. His own confession had confirmed it. His sentence was still pending and pending didn't mean forgiven, it meant the decision hadn't been made yet and the decision still needed to be made. A mate bond didn't erase what came before it. I knew that as well as anyone

But it complicated things in ways I hadn't accounted for when I sent him away from Ashcrest under guard

I pushed off the window and went to find Isla..

She was in our quarters, sitting near the window with the fox she'd bought at the settlement in her hands, turning it over the way she turned things over when she was thinking without trying to think. She looked up when I came in.

Something in my expression told her before I said anything.

She set the fox down and looked at me and waited, the way she waited for things she already knew weren't simple.

I sat beside her and told her everything. The inquiry I'd sent through Pryor. Dara. The resignation. What it meant that Brent was free and why. I didn't filter any of it and I didn't pace the delivery to make it easier. She'd asked me not to do that and I'd agreed and I meant it.

She listened without interrupting.

When I finished she was quiet for a moment.

"A royal guard," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"She felt the bond and she got him out," she said.

"Yes," I said.

She looked at the fox on the table. "I can't be angry at her for that."

"No," I said. "Neither can I."

She looked at me. "But Brent's sentence is still pending."

"Yes," I said. "Nothing changes that."

She nodded once and picked the fox back up and looked at it for a moment.

"What happens next?" she asked.

"We find them," I said. "And then you tell me what you want to do."

She looked at me at that, something moving through her expression that I recognized now, the look she had when something landed exactly where it was supposed to land.

"Okay," she said

The evening had come fully in outside. Wraithbone was quiet and the bond between us was warm and the fox sat in her hands and none of it was simple but all of it was ours to handle together.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 168

Find out first

(Isla)

I sat with it for a long time after Calus finished talking.

Not because I didn't understand it. Because I did, and understanding it was the part that needed sitting with

Brent was free.

Not because he'd escaped. Not because someone had decided his sentence was too harsh or that what he'd done didn't warrant what was coming to him. He was free because a woman had felt the bond arrive and had made the only choice she could make in that moment, the same way every wolf who had ever felt the bond had understood on some level that it rearranged everything around itself without asking permission.

I knew what that felt like.

I set the fox down on the table and looked at it without seeing it.

Dara. Twenty six. Three years in the royal guard, a life built inside Wraithbone's structure, and she'd walked away from all of it in four days. I didn't know her. I'd never met her. But I understood the shape of the decision she'd made more than I could have explained to anyone who hadn't felt the bond arrive the way it arrived, sudden and total and entirely indifferent to timing or consequence.

She'd chosen her mate.

I couldn't find it in me to call that wrong.

What I could find was that Brent's sentence was still pending and that didn't change because of who had gotten him out or why. The confession he'd made in that hall wasn't something a mate bond erased. He'd stood there and said I did it without anyone forcing the words out of him and those words had landed in a room full of witnesses and they were still true regardless of what had happened after.

Caius was watching me from across the room. Not saying anything. Giving me the space to work through it the way he always gave me space to work through things.

"Do you think he told her?" I asked.

Calus looked at me. “Told her what?”

“What he did,” I said. “What he admitted to in the hall. Do you think he told Dara the full truth of it or just enough to let her feel like she knew him?”

Calus was quiet for a moment. “I don’t know,” he said.

I thought about that.

It mattered. Not for the sentence, the sentence was what it was regardless, but it mattered for what kind of man Brent was now versus the man he’d been. The man in the hall who had stripped the excuse out of his own words before they could form into something more manageable was a different version of Brent than the one I’d grown up watching. I didn’t know which one had walked into that settlement. I didn’t know which one Dara had felt the bond with

“I want to know, I said.

Calus looked at me

“When you find them,” I said. “I want to know what he told her.”

“Alright,” he said.

I thought about the market. Standing ten feet from Brent and not flinching. Holding his gaze until he looked away first. I’d filed that moment carefully afterward, not because it wasn’t significant but because I hadn’t wanted it to become the whole of the day.

The market had been full and loud and new in every direction. The Brent moment had been one thing inside all of that.

But it was still there.

It was always going to be there.

He’d put his hands on me. He’d done it knowing what he was doing and not caring what it cost me. He’d said as much in the hall in front of everyone and the words had been stripped of deflection in a way I hadn’t expected from him and still didn’t fully know what to do with.

Vaela stirred inside me.

Not with urgency. Just present, the way she was present when I was working through something that involved more than one answer at once.

‘What do you want from this?‘ she asked.

I thought about it honestly.

Not what I was supposed to want. Not what the right answer looked like from the outside. What I actually wanted when I held the whole of it, Brent free in the settlement, Dara who had given up everything for her mate, a sentence still pending that I had some say in.

‘I want to know if he’s different,‘ I said.

‘Different from what he was, she said.

‘Yes, I said. ‘Not forgiven. Just different.

She was quiet for a moment.

‘Then find out,‘ she said. ‘Before you decide anything else‘

Tlooked at Calus.

“And when you find Brent and Dara,” I said, “I want to be part of whatever happens next. Not told after Part of it

“I know,” he said.

m saying it anyway, I said.

The corner of his mouth moved. “I know that too,” he said.

The bond was warm–between us.

That was the thing I kept coming back to underneath all of it. Whatever was coming with Brent and Dara and his sentence still pending, none of it was mine to carry alone. It hadn’t been mine to carry alone since the day Caius walked through the door of the shack and the bond arrived and rearranged everything

I understood now what that meant in practice.

Not just in the good moments. In the complicated ones too. In the ones where the answer wasn’t clean and the right thing wasn’t obvious and sitting with it was the only honest response available.

I reached for his hand without thinking about it.

He took it the same way.

Neither of us said anything.

Outside Wraithbone was quiet and dark and Brent was somewhere in the settlement with a woman who had chosen him the way Caius had chosen me, without asking whether the timing was right, and his sentence was still pending and none of it was simple.

But we were handling it together.

That was what mattered tonight.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 169

They've been located

(Calus)

Pryor came to the office three days after I'd sent the inquiry.

He sat across from me without being invited to, which he only did when what he had to say required more than a few minutes.

"They've been located," he said.

"Where?"

"The settlement," he said. "Eastern side, away from the market. They've been there since shortly after Dara left Wraithbone."

I sat back. "Together."

"Yes," he said. "Living quietly. No contact with anyone from Ashcrest. No communication with Rodan or Maren or anyone connected to them as far as we can confirm."

"As far as you can confirm," I said.

"We've been watching for three days," Pryor said. "Nothing has moved in or out that connects to Ashcrest. Brent goes to the market, comes back, keeps to himself, doesn't meet anyone twice. Dara hasn't made contact with anyone from Wraithbone."

I thought about that.

Three days of watching and nothing connecting either of them to Ashcrest. That didn't mean the connection didn't exist. It meant if it existed it was either inactive or being managed carefully enough that three days hadn't caught it.

“What is he doing for work?” I asked. “How are they living?”

“Brent is working at a trade yard on the eastern road,” Pryor said. “Loading and unloading. He started four days after they arrived.”

“He went straight to work,” I said.

“Yes,” Pryor said.

I thought about the man who had stood in the Ashcrest hall and said I did it without deflection. Who had looked at Isla in the market and looked away first. A man whose sentence was still pending and who had somehow ended up in a settlement trade yard loading cargo.

None of that was absolution. The sentence was still pending and pending meant the decision hadn’t been made. But a man running a network didn’t take labor work four days after arriving somewhere new. He kept himself available and connected.

Brent was loading cargo.

“Dara?” I asked

She’s been helping at a healer’s house near the market.” Pryor said. “Not formally employed Volunteering

A former royal guard volunteering at a healer’s house.

I filed that without eommenting on it.

“Does he know we’ve found them?” I asked

“No,” Pryor said. “The watch has been careful.”

“Good,” I said. “Keep it that way for now.”

Pryor nodded once. He didn’t ask what came next and I didn’t offer it yet because I didn’t fully know. What I knew was that Isla had asked to be part of whatever happened next and I’d agreed and I meant it.

“That’s all for now,” I said.

He stood and left, pulling the door closed behind him.

I sat at the desk for a while after he’d gone.

Brent at a trade yard. Dara at a healer's house. Both of them building something out of a situation that had nothing ordinary at its origin. The bond had arrived and Dara had made a decision and whatever she knew or didn't know about Brent, she had chosen him anyway. Whatever they were building now was built on that.

That wasn't nothing.

It didn't change what Brent had done. It didn't move the sentence or erase the confession or change the fact that his hands had been on Isia and he'd known what he was doing and done it anyway. The bond and a confession and a trade yard didn't undo any of that.

But they were information.

And Isla had asked to have the information before anything else moved.

I found her in the library.

She was sitting near the window with a book open in her lap that she wasn't reading. She looked up when I came in and read my expression before I said a word.

"They found them," she said.

"Yes," I said.

I sat across from her and told her everything Pryor had said. The settlement. The eastern side away from the market. Three days of watching with nothing connecting either of them to Ashcrest. Brent at the trade yard. Dara at the healer's house.

She listened without interrupting.

When I finished she was quiet for a moment.

"He went straight to work," she said.

"Yes" said

She held that for a moment. "That matters to you."

"It's information," I said, "Tdon't know yet what it means."

She looked at me. "It means he's not running anything. He went somewhere and started working."

"That's what it looks like," I said. "Three days isn't long enough to be certain."

"No," she said. "But it's something."

She looked back at the window. Outside the training yard was running its afternoon drills. She watched without seeing it, the way she did when she was working through something underneath the surface

“I want to go there,” she said.

I looked at her.

“Not to confront him,” she said. “I want to see them. Understand what I’m deciding about before I decide it.”

“We’d go together,” I said.

“Yes,” she said.

“And if he sees us?”

She looked at me. “Then he sees us,” she said. “I’m not hiding from my brother.”

“When?” I asked.

She thought about it. “Soon,” she said. “Before I spend another week sitting with this.”

“Tomorrow,” I said.

She nodded once and looked back out the window.

I stayed where I was for a moment, looking at her. The bond was warm between us and the library was quiet and outside Wraithbone went about its afternoon without needing anything from either of us.

I thought about the last time she’d been in that settlement. What she’d carried home without saying anything. The way she’d told me about Brent that evening, choosing her own timing, her own words.

Tomorrow would be different.

Tomorrow I’d be beside her.

That mattered more than I could have explained to anyone who hadn’t watched her carry things alone for as long as she had. She wasn’t carrying this one alone.

She hadn’t been carrying anything alone since the bond settled between us and she’d stopped checking whether she was allowed to reach for me.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 170

Nothing else would do

(Isla)

The settlement looked different with Caius beside me.

Not the place itself. The streets were the same, the noise was the same, the smell of food from the stalls carried the same way it had the first time. But something about moving through it with him changed how it felt. Nobody here knew what we were but they felt something when we passed. People stepped aside without knowing why. Conversations paused for a second and then resumed.

Caius noticed. He didn't say anything about it.

We'd come without guards this time. His decision, not mine. He'd said two people moved through a settlement without drawing attention. A group did not. I hadn't argued because he was right and because I didn't want anything about today to feel like an official visit.

This wasn't official.

This was mine.

We walked east, away from the market, toward the part of the settlement I hadn't seen the first time. The streets were quieter here, the buildings closer together, the kind of neighborhood where people lived rather than traded Laundry on lines. Children in doorways. The ordinary texture of lives being lived without anyone watching.

Caius had the address from Pryor's report. He knew where the healer's house was. He led without making it look like leading, just moving in the right direction at a pace that didn't draw attention.

I saw Dara before he did.

She was outside the healer's house stacking empty crates against the wall, her back to us, her hair pulled back. She was younger than I'd imagined. Something about the word guard had put an older image in my head. She was maybe a year or two older than me at most.

She turned before we reached her.

She saw Caius first. Her face went very still, the way a wolf's face went still when something significant was standing in front of it and it was deciding what to do. Then she saw me and something shifted in her expression that I didn't have a word for yet.

She didn't run.

She stood there with her hands at her sides and looked at us and waited.

"Dara, Caius said.

"Alpha King," she said. Her voice was calm. Not defiant. Not afraid. Just present.

His eyes moved to me.

I stepped forward.

Tm tala" I said, which she already knew but I said it anyway because it felt right to say it.

"I know who you are," she said.

"I know you do," I said. "Tht not here to cause trouble for you. I need to understand some things before any decisions get made. That's all this is."

She looked at me for a long moment. Then she nodded once.

"He's at the trade yard until midday," she said. "If you want to speak to him you'll need to wait or go there."

"Well wait," I said.

She looked at Caius. He gave nothing back, just stood there and let me handle it the way I'd asked him to let me handle it when we were still in the vehicle on the way here.

"There's somewhere to sit inside," Dara said.

We followed her in.

The healer's house was small and clean and smelled like dried herbs and something medicinal I didn't recognize. An older woman moved through the back room without looking at us, focused on whatever she was doing, unbothered by visitors. Dara led us to a small table near the front and we sat.

For a moment nobody spoke.

Then I asked her the thing I'd been holding since Caius told me about her.

“Did he tell you?” I asked. “Before you helped him. Did he tell you what he did?”

She held my gaze. “Yes,” she said.

“Everything?”

“Everything,” she said. “He told me before I made any decision. He said I needed to know what I was choosing before I chose it.”

I sat with that.

The man in the Ashcrest hall had stripped the excuse out of his own words in front of sixty wolves. And then he’d done it again in private, to the woman who could have walked away, before she had any reason to stay.

That wasn’t the Brent I’d grown up with.

“And you chose him anyway.” I said.

“Yes,” she said. Without hesitation. Without apology.

I looked at her for a moment. “I’m not angry at you,” I said. “I want you to know that. What you did to help him, I understand why”

Something moved through her expression. Not relief exactly. Something quieter than that.

“His sentence is still pending,” I said. “That doesn’t change. But how it goes from here depends partly on what I see today. What I understand

She nodded once.

We sat in the quiet of the healer’s house and waited.

He arrived forty minutes later.

I heard the door before I saw him, the sound of someone whe had been told something significant was waiting and had come anyway without running. He came through the door and stopped when he saw us.

He looked at Caius first, the way everyone looked at Caius first. Then his eyes moved to me.

We looked at each other across the small room.

He was thinner than I remembered. Not from hardship, from work, the kind of thin that came from physical labor and regular meals and a body being used properly for the first

time in a while. He looked tired in a way that was different from the exhaustion I'd grown up watching in him. That exhaustion had been the exhaustion of someone who didn't think about what they were doing. This looked like someone who thought about it all the time.

Dara stood beside him.

He didn't sit down. Neither did I.

"Isla," he said.

"Brent," I said.

The room was quiet around us. Caius was behind me, present and still, giving me everything I'd asked for and nothing I hadn't.

"You came," Brent said.

"I came," I said.

He held my gaze. "I didn't think you would."

"I needed to see you," I said. "Before I decide anything I needed to see who you are now."

He didn't look away. "And?"

I looked at him. At the man standing in a healer's house in a settlement he had no right to be in, thinner and tired and not running from anything, beside a woman who had chosen him after knowing the full truth of what he was.

"I don't know yet," I said honestly. "That's why I'm here."

Something moved through his face.

Not relief

Not hope.

Something more careful than either of those things.

Then ask me what you need to ask," he said. "I'm not going anywhere."

Somments

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 171

The whole of it

(Isla)

I looked at him for a moment before I spoke.

“Why did you do it?” I asked. “Not what you said in the hall. I heard that I mean why. Not the orders. Not Rodan. Why did you do it when you didn’t have to.”

He was quiet for a moment.

“Because it was easy,” he said.

That landed differently than I expected.

Not a complicated answer. Not an excuse dressed up as an explanation. Just the truth sitting there with nothing around it.

“Easy,” I said.

“You were there,” he said. “You couldn’t fight back. Rodan wanted someone to take it out on and you were the option. I could have chosen not to. I didn’t.” He held my gaze. “That’s the whole of it.”

I looked at him.

“You knew it was wrong,” I said.

“Yes,” he said.

“While you were doing it.”

“Yes,” he said again.

I sat with that. The honesty of it was harder to hold than anger would have been. Anger I knew how to carry. This required something else, something I didn’t have a name for yet, the work of standing in front of a truth that didn’t resolve into anything clean.

“Did you ever think about stopping?” I asked.

He looked at the floor for a second before looking back at me. “Once,” he said. “When you were sixteen. You got sick and Rodan pulled the wolfsbane for three days because he needed you working. I saw what three days without it did to you.” He stopped. “I thought about it then.”

“But you didn’t stop,” I said.

“No,” he said. “I didn’t.”

Dara was still beside him, not touching him, not inserting herself into the conversation. Just there, the way Caius was behind me. Present. Letting it be what it needed to be.

“What changed?” I asked. “In the hall. You didn’t have to say what you said. You could have said you followed orders and let it land differently.”

Brent looked at me. “I’d been carrying it since Caius walked through the door of that shack,” he said. “Every day after that. Watching what Ashcrest became when someone actually looked at it clearly. Watching What you became when someone gave you room to.” He paused. “The hall felt like the only place I was ever going to get to put it down.”

I looked at him for long moment.

Vaela stirred inside me. Not pushing Just present, the way she was present when something required her attention but not her intervention.

“You didn’t do it for me,” I said. “What you said in the hall.”

“No,” he said. “I did it because it was true and it needed saying. You didn’t need anything from me by then”

That was the most honest thing he’d said and it landed the way honest things landed, without softening, without asking for anything back.

I looked at Dara

“He told you all of this,” I said. “Before you helped him.”

“Yes,” she said.

“And you still chose him.”

“I chose him because he told me,” she said. “Not in spite of it. A man who tells you the worst of himself before he has any reason to is a different thing from a man who hides it.”

I looked between them.

Something had shifted that I couldn’t name exactly. Not forgiveness. Not resolution. Something quieter than both of those things. A story that had been told one way for a long time being held up to the light and examined from a different angle.

I turned to Caius.

He was watching me. Not Brent. Me. Waiting for whatever came next with the same patience he'd brought to every difficult thing since the day he found me.

I looked back at Brent.

"Your sentence is still pending," I said. "I want you to understand that clearly. What you told Dara and what you said in that hall and what you've built here doesn't erase what you did. It doesn't move the line.

"I know," he said.

"But it's information," I said. "And I'm going to take it back with me and sit with it before anything gets decided."

He nodded once.

"Is there anything you want to say to me?" I asked. "Not about the sentence. Not about Dara. Anything you want to say to me directly."

He was quiet for a long moment

Then he said, 'I'm sorry"

Two words. No elaboration. No list of everything he was sorry for or explanation of how sorry or what it had cost him to get here, Just the words sitting in the air between us.

I looked at him.

"I know," I said.

Not I forgive you. Not it's fine. Not any of the things people said when they wanted a moment to be over

Just I know

Because I did know. I'd known it from the hall when he'd stripped the excuse out before it could form. I'd known it in the market when he looked away first. I'd known it sitting across from Dara twenty minutes ago when she'd told me he'd said everything before she had any reason to stay.

I knew.

What I did with knowing was a different question and one I wasn't ready to answer today.

I stood up.

Caius moved with me, not rushing, just there.

I looked at Dara. “What you did had consequences,” I said. “You understand that.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Caius will address that separately,” I said. “But I want you to know I understand why you made the choice you made. That matters to me even if it doesn’t change what the choice was.”

She held my gaze. “Thank you,” she said quietly.

I looked at Brent one more time.

He was standing where he’d been standing since he walked through the door, not moving, not reaching for anything, just present. Waiting. Not for absolution. Not for a verdict. Just waiting the way someone waited when they understood the decision wasn’t theirs to make.

“I’ll be in touch,” I said.

He nodded once.

We left.

Outside the settlement moved around us the way it always moved, people and noise and ordinary life continuing without any awareness of what had just happened inside a small healer’s house on the easter side of a street nobody paid attention to.

Caius walked beside me

Neither of us spoke until we reached the vehicle.

Then he looked at me.

How are you?” he asked.

I thought about it honestly before I answered.

“I don’t know yet,” said “But I’m glad I came.”

He nodded once and held the door and I got in.

I stopped thinking about it somewhere on the road back.

Not because I'd figured it out. Because I'd carried it as far as I could for one day and the rest of it needed time I hadn't given it yet.

Caius didn't ask me anything else.

That was exactly what I needed.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 172

One thing at a time

(Calus)

I watched her the whole time.

Not Brent. Not Dara, Isla

I'd told her I would let her handle it and I'd meant it and I stood behind her and kept every instinct I had pointed at the wall and watched her do something I couldn't have done in her position. Not because I lacked the composure. Because I wouldn't have asked the questions she asked. I would have gone in with what I knew and delivered what needed delivering and left with the matter settled.

She went in with nothing decided and came out with more than she'd had before.

That was the difference between us and it wasn't a small one.

Dara had surprised me.

Not her willingness to face us. I'd half expected that from a former royal guard, the training held even after everything else had changed. What surprised me was how she spoke to Isla. Directly. Without deflection. Without the performance of remorse that people put on when they were trying to manage a situation rather than answer for it.

She'd answered for it.

The part about Brent telling her everything before she made the decision had landed in me differently than I'd expected. I hadn't known that. I'd assumed she'd felt the bond and acted without full information the way wolves sometimes did when the bond arrived without warning. Instead he'd told her the worst of himself first and she'd chosen him anyway.

That wasn't nothing.

Brent had surprised me more.

I hadn't expected the because it was easy. I'd expected deflection, justification, the careful reshaping of memory that people did when they were trying to present themselves as better than the record showed. Instead he'd handed Isla the plainest possible version of the truth and let her do what she wanted with it.

The man in that healer's house was not the same man who had stood in the Ashcrest hall. Or rather, the man in the hall had already been becoming this man and the hall had been part of that becoming. The confession hadn't been performance. It had been the beginning of something.

I didn't know yet what that meant for the sentence.

That was Isla's decision and I'd told her it was Isla's decision and I'd meant that too.

The drive back was quiet.

She looked out the window and I didn't ask anything and Vorak stayed where he was, present and settled, not pushing for anything. The bond between us was warm and she was tired in the way she got tired after something had required everything from her and she'd given it.

When we gut back to Wraithbone I went to find Pryor

He was in the office waiting, which told me he'd felt us arrive through the pack bond and had positioned himself accordingly +-closed the door and sat down.

"Dara," I said.

He looked at me.

"She's been located and spoken to," I said. "She didn't run. She answered for what she did without being asked twice." I looked at the desk for a moment. "She needs to be formally addressed but I want it handled carefully

"Because of the bond," Pryor said.

"Because of the bond," I said. "And because of how she handled today. That counts for something"

Pryor was quiet for a moment. "What are you thinking?"

"A formal censure," I said. "Removal from royal guard standing permanently. But no confinement. She gave up her position and her place in Wraithbone when she left. That's already been paid."

Pryor nodded slowly. “And if she wants to return to Wraithbone at some point?”

“That depends on what happens with Brent,” I said. “One thing at a time.”

He wrote something in the margin of the document in front of him and set his pen down. “The sentence.”

“Isla is sitting with it,” I said. “She’ll tell me when she’s ready. Nothing moves until she does.”

He nodded once. He didn’t ask what she was likely to decide and I didn’t offer it because I genuinely didn’t know. I had thoughts. I had instincts about where she was heading based on what I’d watched in that healer’s house. But they were her thoughts to arrive at, not mine to predict.

“One more thing.” I said.

Pryor looked up.

“The guard captain who didn’t flag Dara’s resignation,” I said. “I want a conversation with him. Not formal. Just a conversation about what gets flagged and what doesn’t when a prisoner transport has just come back.”

“I’ll arrange it,” Pryor said.

I stood and left him to it.

Isla was in our quarters when I got there.

She was sitting on the bed with her back against the headboard, not reading, not doing anything in particular, just present in the quiet the way she sometimes was after something had taken a lot from her She looked up when I came in.

“Pryor?” she asked

“Handled,” I said. “Dara will receive a formal censure. No confinement.”

She nodded once. Something in her expression settled slightly.

“That’s right,” she said

“I thought so,” I said

I sat beside her and the bond was warm between us and neither of us said anything for a while Outside Wraithbone moved through its evening, the pack settling into the quieter

hours, the territory carrying everything it always carried without needing either of us to direct any of it.

“He meant it,” she said eventually. “The apology.”

“I know,” I said.

I’m not ready to do anything with that yet,” she said. “But I know he meant it.”

“You don’t have to be ready,” I said. “There’s no timeline on this.”

She looked at me. “You’re not going to tell me what you think I should do.”

“No.” I said.

“Even though you have thoughts about it.”

“Yes,” I said.

She smiled at that. “What are they?”

I looked at her. “The man in that house is not the same man from Ashcrest,” I said. “That matters. What it means for the sentence is something only you can decide. But it matters.”

She was quiet for a moment.

“He said watching what I became when someone gave me room to was part of what changed him,” she said. “I keep thinking about that.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I don’t know how to feel about being the reason someone decided to be better,” she said. “After everything they did to make me worse.”

That landed in me with more weight than I’d expected.

I didn’t have an easy answer for it because there wasn’t one. She was carrying something genuinely complicated and she knew it was complicated and she wasn’t asking me to make it simpler.

“You don’t have to know what to call it,” I said. “You just have to decide what comes next.

She looked at the window.

“I know,” she said. “I will.”

I believed her.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 173

Full circumstances

(Isla)

Caius left after we spoke.

Something about Pryor and the guard captain and the follow up from the settlement visit. He'd looked at me for a moment the way he looked at me when he was checking without asking, and then he'd gone.

I sat in our quarters for a while after he left.

The decision had been sitting with me since the healer's house. Not heavily. Not the way things used to sit on me when I had no way to move them. More like something waiting at the edge of my attention that I kept circling without landing on.

I reached for my phone and opened it.

I didn't know exactly what to search for at first. I typed pending sentence wolf pack law into the search and got results that were mostly about human legal systems which wasn't what I needed. I tried again. Pack law confession direct harm. That got closer. I spent twenty minutes reading through things I only half understood before I found a site that explained wolf territorial law in plain language and I stayed there for a long time.

What I found was this.

A pending sentence with a confession already on record gave the Alpha King or ruling authority full discretion over outcome. It wasn't bound by standard sentencing guidelines the way a denied charge would be. The confession changed the shape of what was possible. It meant the decision could go anywhere from full execution to conditional release depending on what the ruling authority decided was just given the full circumstances.

Full circumstances.

I put the phone down for a moment and thought about that.

The full circumstances were complicated. They included years of harm done knowingly. They included a confession made without being pushed. They included a man who had

gone to a trade yard four days after arriving somewhere new and started loading cargo. They included a woman who had given up everything she'd built because the bond arrived and she'd chosen her mate anyway.

They included me standing in a healer's house and asking why and getting the plainest answer I'd ever received from anyone who had ever hurt me.

alt

Because it was easy.

I picked the phone back up.

I searched for something different this time. Conditional release pending sentence wolf law. What came up was more specific than I expected. Conditional release was an option in cases where the confession demonstrated genuine accountability and the behavior since the offence suggested the risk of repeated harm was low. It came with conditions attached Regular reporting. Restricted movement. A formal record that followed the person permanently. It wasn't freedom. It was something in between, a recognition that the harm was real and documented and that the person carrying it was being held to account in a way that didn't require a cell.

I sat with that for a long time.

Vaela stirred inside me.

'Is that what you want?' she asked.

I thought about it honestly.

Not what was easiest. Not what looked right from the outside. What I actually wanted when I held the full picture of it, Brent in that healer's house, the answer he'd given me, the apology with nothing around it, the man who had watched me become something and let it change him even when it was too late to matter for anything except the truth.

'I don't want him free,' I said. 'Not without conditions.'

'No, Vaela said. 'But you don't want him in a cell either.'

'No,' I said. 'I don't.'

She was quiet after that.

I looked at the phone again. I went back to the first site and read through the conditional release section one more time, making sure I understood what it actually meant in practice. The conditions could be set by the ruling authority. Caius. Which meant they

could be specific. They could be tailored to exactly what the situation called for rather than a standard set of restrictions that didn't account for any of the things that made this situation what it was.

That mattered.

I put the phone down on the bed beside me and looked at the window.

Brent had said the hall felt like the only place he was ever going to get to put it down. I'd been alt thinking about that since the healer's house. Not because it softened anything Because it told me something about where he was in all of this. He wasn't carrying it lightly. He wasn't moving through his days in the settlement pretending the past was something that had happened to someone else.

He was carrying it.

He'd chosen to carry it out loud in that hall and he'd done it again in that healer's house and those were two separate choices made in two very different rooms and they added up to something I couldn't dismiss even when I wanted to.

I wasn't ready to forgive him.

I didn't know if I ever would be and I wasn't going to decide that today. Forgiveness wasn't what this was about. This was about what happened to a man who had confessed, who hadn't run, who had built something quiet and ordinary in a settlement he had no right to be in, and what the right response to all of that looked like when the person making the decision was the person he had hurt.

I sat there a moment longer.

Not because I was still deciding. Because I wanted to be sure the decision was coming from me and not from exhaustion or the weight of the day or the way Brent had looked at me across that small room. I waited until the answer felt the same as it had five minutes ago.

It did.

I wasn't doing this for Brent. I wasn't doing it because the apology had moved me or because Dara's choice had softened something or because watching him in that healer's house had made the past easier to carry.

I was doing it because it was the right answer when I held everything honestly and looked at it clearly.

Not the easiest answer. Not the one that made the past smaller or the harm less real. Just the one that fit when I looked at everything together and didn't turn away from any of it.

I got up and went to find Caius.

1.88 alt

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 174

Nothing changes

(Caius)

She found me in the office an hour after I'd left her.

I heard her footsteps in the corridor before she reached the door, the sound of someone who had already made up her mind. I set my pen down before she knocked.

She came in and closed the door behind her and stood in front of the desk and looked at me.

"I know what I want," she said.

I waited.

She sat down across from me, not on the edge of the chair the way she used to sit when she was still learning whether she was allowed to be comfortable in a room, but fully, the way she sat everywhere now.

"Conditional release," she said. "With conditions we set. Not standard restrictions.

Conditions that fit this specific situation."

I looked at her.

"You researched it," I said.

"Yes," she said. "I needed to understand what was possible before I decided what I wanted."

That was Isla. Not waiting for someone to bring her the options. Going to find them herself.

"Tell me what you're thinking," I said.

She leaned forward slightly. “He reports to a designated authority at regular intervals. Monthly at minimum. He stays within a defined area, the settlement and its immediate surrounds, nothing beyond that without permission. The record stays permanent, it follows him everywhere, every pack or community he ever enters knows what he did and what the sentence was.” She held my gaze. “And he has no contact with anyone from Ashcrest. Not Rodan. Not Maren. Not Derek. Not any of them. Ever.”

I sat with that.

It was precise. It wasn’t lenient and it wasn’t cruel. It accounted for everything he’d done and everything he’d shown since, and it left him with a life that was genuinely restricted in ways that mattered without putting him in a cell for something that a permanent record and regular reporting could hold just as well.

Nothing bags

“The no contact condition,” I said. “That’s the one with teeth.”

“Yes” she said. “If he breaks it the conditional release ends and the original sentence applies. No second chance.”

“Agreed,” I said.

She looked at me. “You’re not going to argue with any of it?”

“No,” I said. “It’s right.”

Something moved through her expression. Not surprise exactly. More like relief at not having to defend it.

“Dara?” she asked,

“Formal censure. Permanent removal from royal guard standing. No confinement.” I looked at her, “I handled that earlier.”

She nodded, “Good,”

I picked up my pen and pulled a document toward me. “I’ll have Pryor draw up the formal terms today. The conditions need to be in writing before anything is delivered to Brent.”

“How long will that take?” she asked.

“A day” I said. “Maybe two. Pryor is thorough.”

She nodded once and sat back. The tension that had been in her since the healer’s house had changed into something different. Not gone. Settled. The way things settled when a

decision had been made and the making of it had been the right thing regardless of how the rest of it went.

I watched her for a moment.

“How do you feel?” I asked.

She thought about it before answering, which was always a good sign with Isla. She never gave me the easy answer when the honest one was available.

“I feel like I did what I could with what I had,” she said. “I don’t feel good about it and I don’t feel bad about it, I just feel like it’s done.”

“It doesn’t have to be anything more than that,” I said.

She looked at me. “Are you sure?”

alt

Nothing changes

“Yes,” I said. “Not every decision comes with relief attached. Some of them just come with the knowledge that you did it right.”

She held my gaze for a moment. Then she nodded once and looked at the desk

“What happens when the formal terms are ready?” she asked.

“Pryor sends word to the settlement,” I said. “Brent is informed of the conditions in writing He has the option to accept or decline.”

She frowned slightly. “He can decline?”

“Conditional release requires acceptance,” I said. “If he declines the original sentence applies.”

She was quiet for a moment. “He won’t decline.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t think he will either.”

She looked at the window. Outside the evening had settled fully into night and the office was warm and quiet. Neither of us felt any need to fill the silence.

“Dara accepting the censure,” she said. “Does she have to formally accept that too?”

“It’s been delivered,” I said. “She doesn’t have the option to decline a censure the way Brent has the option to decline conditional release. It’s a formal mark not an offer.”

“Will she know about Brent’s sentence?” she asked.

“When it’s formally delivered yes,” I said. “They’re in the same location. She’ll know.”

Isla looked at her hands for a moment. “I think she already knows he’s going to be alright,” she said. “She didn’t look like someone waiting to find out how things went. She looked like someone who had already decided they were going to be fine.”

I thought about Dara in that healer’s house. The way she’d stood there and faced us without running. The way she’d answered Isla’s questions without deflection or performance.

“She probably has,” I said.

Isla looked back at me. “She’s good for him,” she said. “That’s not why I’m doing this. But it’s true.”

“I know,” I said.

She stood up.

I stood with her

For a moment we just looked at each other across the desk. Neither of us said anything.

“Thank you,” she said.

I looked at her. “For what?”

“For letting it be mine,” she said. “The decision. You could have made it weeks ago and you didn’t.”

“It was never mine to make,” I said.

She held my gaze for a moment longer. Then she came around the desk and I met her halfway and she leaned into me.

“If it had been entirely my decision,” I said, “Brent would have stood beside Rodan

“I know.”

I rested my chin lightly against the top of her head.

“And Vera?” I asked. “Cole. Your parents.”

She was quiet for a moment.

“Their sentences still stand,” she said. “Nothing changes.”

I nodded once.

“You’re certain?”

“Yes.”

“They all had choices,” she said. “Brent was the only one who showed me something different after everything that happened.”

I held her a little closer.

“Then their sentences remain exactly as they are.”

The office settled into silence again.

Not the uncertain silence that had followed us through so many conversations over the last few months. This one felt different. This one felt like an ending.

She drew a slow breath.

alt delete

“I don’t think I’ll ever understand why they made the choices they did.”

“You don’t have to,” I said.

She looked at me for a long moment before nodding once.

Then we left the office together.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 175

Change of topic

(Caius)

The office felt too formal after that conversation.

Without saying anything I led her toward the sitting room instead. The fire was already burning when we went inside and Isla sat on the rug in front of it before I had the chance to suggest anywhere else.

I sat beside her.

For a while we watched the flames together.

“You were right,” she said quietly.

“About what?”

“Not every decision comes with relief.”

I looked at her.

“But this one came with peace.”

I nodded once.

“I was hoping you’d find that.”

She looked at me.

“You already knew I would?”

“I thought you might.”

She smiled faintly before looking back at the fire.

“I kept thinking forgiving Brent meant I had to forgive all of them.”

“And now?”

“I know it doesn’t.”

I watched the flames dance across the logs.

“No,” I said. “It never did.”

She drew one knee closer to her chest and rested her arms around it. The fire reflected in her alt ct eyes as she watched it without really seeing it. I knew that look well enough now. It was the look she wore when she was putting the last pieces of something into place.

“I don’t think about revenge anymore,” she said. “I thought I would after everything they did. Instead I just wanted it to end.”

I looked at her for a moment before answering.

“Wanting something to end doesn’t make you weak. Sometimes it takes more strength than holding on ever could.”

She leaned back against the sofa and let out a slow breath. I thought the conversation had reached its natural end.

Apparently she disagreed.

“Change of topic,” she said.

I looked at her.

“Go on.”

She smiled slightly.

“When are we going to have sex again?”

I stared at her.

She tilted her head.

“What?”

“I wasn’t expecting that question.”

“I know.”

“You planned that.”

“Maybe.”

I looked at her for a long moment.

“Anytime you want,” I said. “You don’t have to ask.”

She blinked.

“I don’t?”

Your if to se gewebe dose to me said its something you want, all you have to do is to

Her smile grow just a little

So if I walked into your office toronow and said I wanted you to come to our quarters?”

16 come to our quarters

She laughed quietly

I’ve shocked you twice today”

1looked at her

You’re becoming very good at it

WW take that as a compliment

” was

She looked at me for another moment.

“Can i ask for something else?

You already are

She smiled

‘know‘

I waited

1 don’t want to stay in the pack house tonight.”

alt ctr

I looked at her.

“I just want it to be us.”

I held her gaze for a moment before answering.

“Then we’ll leave.”

She tilted her head slightly.

“Where?”

“There’s a cabin on the northern side of our territory.”

She waited.

“It belongs to me,” I said. “I haven’t stayed there in a long time.”

“Just us?”

“Just us.”

Her smile returned.

“I’d like that.”

“So would I.”

We didn’t stay by the fire much longer after that.

Isla stood first and held out her hand. I took it, and together we left the sitting room and went to our quarters.

The pack house was quiet around us, most of the wolves already settled into the later hours, the corridors empty.

She went straight to the closet when we reached our quarters.

I watched her pull out a change of clothes and set them on the bed with the focused efficiency of someone who had decided something and was moving toward it.

She wasn’t nervous.

She wasn’t second guessing herself anymore.

She was simply getting ready, the way she did everything now, with quiet certainty.

“What do I need?” she asked without looking up.

alt ctr

“Something warm,” I said. “The cabin will be warm once the fire is going, but the journey the won’t be.”

She nodded and exchanged one layer for another before packing everything neatly into a small canvas bag.

I gathered a few things of my own before slinging the bag over my shoulder.

Together we left our quarters and made our way outside.

The pack house had settled into the quiet that came with night, only a handful of lamps still burning along the corridors.

The doors eased shut behind us, leaving the warmth of the pack house at our backs.

A cool breeze carried the scent of pine through the night air.

Isla breathed it in with a smile that reached her eyes.

I found myself smiling back.

We walked until the sounds of the pack house had faded behind us.

When we reached the edge of the forest, we stopped without needing to discuss it.

The shift came easily, welcomed rather than summoned.

Vorak settled into an easy run, every stride carrying us deeper into the forest.

Vaela matched my pace without effort, occasionally darting ahead before falling back beside me again.

We ran between the trees as though the mountain itself had opened a path for us.

The wind carried the familiar scents of Wraithborne through the night while the cabin drew closer.

Without needing to look at each other, we lengthened our stride and covered the last stretch together.

The trees finally opened into a small clearing.

The cabin stood exactly where I'd left it, tucked beneath the pines with its porch facing the mountains beyond.

Vaela slowed beside me while Vorak came to an easy stop.

For years it had been nothing more than a place I came to be alone.

alt ctr shift end

Tonight, I wasn't arriving alone.

I looked at Vaela once before leading the way toward the cabin. She fell into step beside me without hesitation, just as she always did now.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 176

The cabin

(Isla)

The cabin was smaller than I expected.

Not in a bad way. In the way that things were smaller than you imagined when the person describing them had spent years filling them with their own solitude. It sat in the clearing like it belonged there, tucked under the pines with the mountains visible beyond the tree line, dark and quiet and entirely separate from everything we'd left behind at the pack house

Caius pushed the door open and stepped aside to let me in first.

I went in and stood for a moment just looking.

One room. A fireplace on the far wall. A table with two chairs. A bed along one side, not large not dressed the way our quarters were dressed, just a bed with plain covers that had been there a long time and showed it. A shelf with a few things on it. A window facing the mountains.

That was all

I turned to look at Caius.

"You came here alone," I said.

"Yes," he said.

"For how long at a time?"

"A few days usually," he said.

I looked at the shelf and the table and the single window facing the mountains and thought about something he'd told me a long time ago when I'd asked him to tell me about himself

That he liked the quiet.

Not the absence of noise exactly. The kind of quiet that didn't ask anything from you

"Is this where you came to think?" I asked.

He looked at me. "Sometimes," he said. "When the territory needed less and my head needed more

"Did it help?"

alt

↑ shift end ctrl

"Usually," he said. "There's something about being away from the pack house that made problems easier to see clearly. No one needing decisions. No correspondence waiting. Just the fire and the trees."

I looked around again. "I understand that now," I said. "I didn't before. I used to think being alone was just what happened when nobody wanted you around."

He looked at me.

"Now I know the difference," I said.

"I like it," I said.

Something moved through his expression. "I thought you might."

He crossed to the fireplace and I watched him build the fire the way he built everything, without wasted movement, without needing to think about it. Within a few minutes the room was catching warmth and the window had gone from black to the dark orange of firelight reflected against glass.

I sat on the edge of the bed and looked around while he worked.

Vaela was quiet inside me. Not absent. Just content in the way she'd been content since we shifted and ran through the trees, the ease of a wolf who had been given exactly what she needed without having to ask for it.

I thought about the run.

I'd shifted more times now than I could count on one hand, enough that the change itself had stopped being something I braced for and become something I simply did. But running through the forest at night beside Caius, the two of us moving through the dark

between the trees, that had been something different. Not a shift for a purpose. Not a demonstration or a necessity. Just running because the night was there and we were in it and neither of us needed to be anywhere else.

I hadn't known that was something I was missing until I had it.

Caius finished with the fire and stood and turned to find me watching him.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said. "I was thinking about the run."

He sat beside me on the bed. The fire was building properly now and the room was warmer than it had been a minute ago and outside the pines moved slightly in the wind coming off the mountain.

"You differently tonight he said

1ooked at him. How?

ke you werent thinking about it he said. "The first few times you shifted you ran like you were still leaming what your legs could do. Tonight you just ran

I thought about that

He was night. I hadn't been thinking about it. I'd just been in it, in the dark and the cold and the pine smell and the ground under my paws, and none of it had required managing

Is that what it's supposed to feel like?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "That's exactly what it's supposed to feel like

I looked at the fire for a moment.

"I spent so long not having it," I said. "Sometimes I still catch myself waiting for it to be taken back

"I know," he said.

"Does that go away?"

He was quiet for a moment. "I think it gets quieter," he said. "I don't know if it goes away completely. But it gets quieter."

I nodded once.

That was honest and I appreciated honest more than I appreciated reassurance that wasn't true. The feeling of waiting for it to be taken had gotten quieter since the mating and the mark. Not gone. Quieter.

I lay back on the bed and looked at the ceiling

The cabin ceiling was lower than our quarters and had a beam running across it that had darkened with age. I looked at it and listened to the fire and the wind in the pines and thought about the day from beginning to end.

The research on my phone. Vaela's question. Going to find Caius. The sitting room and the fire and the conversation that had gone somewhere I hadn't planned for it to go when I walked in.

When are we going to have sex again

I smiled at the ceiling.

alt ctri

The cabin

I hadn't planned that. It had just arrived the way things arrived now, without me managing them first, without the checking that used to live between a thought and the speaking of it. it had been in my head and I'd said it and the look on his face had been worth every second of the silence that followed.

"You're smiling, Caius said.

"I know," I said.

"About?"

"Earlier," I said, "In the sitting room."

A quiet sound from him that wasn't quite a laugh but was close to one.

"I wasn't expecting that," he said.

"I know," I said. "That was the point."

He lay down beside me and we looked at the ceiling together and the fire burned and the wind moved through the pines outside and the bond between us was warm and easy and entirely without the reaching quality it had carried for so long.

I turned my head to look at him.

He was already looking at me.

The pack house was somewhere behind us, past the trees, past the dark miles of territory that had reached for me before I'd earned it and kept reaching every day since. Pryor was probably still in the office. The formal terms for Brent's sentence were being drafted and would be ready in a day or two and then that thread would be as resolved as it was going to be for now.

None of it was here.

Here was a cabin under the pines and a fire that had been building for twenty minutes and a man lying beside me who had asked for nothing and given everything and let me arrive at every decision in my own time without once making me feel the cost of the waiting

Vaela stirred inside me.

This is good, she said.

'Yes, I said. 'It is.'

I turned my head to look at Caius.

it ctri

↑ shift

The cabin

He was already looking at me.

The feeling of waiting for it to be taken was so quiet I could barely find it at all.

Just honest

(Isla)

$25 Porte

I held his gaze for a moment, then moved first.

I turned onto my side and put my hand on his chest. Warm skin. Slow breath. Real. He stayed still and let me come to him, like he understood that some things mattered more when they were chosen.

1 leaned in and kissed him.

It wasn’t a teasing kiss. Not shy either. Just honest. My mouth on his, my hand sliding up his neck, his hand coming to my waist like it belonged there. He kissed me back at once, and there was nothing rushed in it. Nothing held back either.

I drew back just enough to look at him.

“I meant what I said earlier,” I said.

His hand moved along my side. “I know.”

“I’ve been thinking about it all day.”

A small change came over his face at that, and I liked knowing I could still do that to him.

“Isla.”

Just my name. But the way he said it made heat move through me.

I kissed him again before he could say anything else. This time I moved closer, one leg sliding over his, my body fitting to his without effort. His hand came to my back and held me there. I could feel how much care he was using, and for once I didn’t want care first. I wanted him.

I took his hand and guided it down.

His eyes stayed on mine.

“Want me to take my time?” he asked.

“No.”

That answer changed something. Not into roughness. Not into force. Just need without restraint.

He rolled over me and braced himself above me for one second, giving me room to change my mind if I wanted to. I didn’t. I reached for him at once, and he came down to kiss me again, deeper now, his hand sliding under my shirt, across my stomach, then higher 1 breathed his name into his mouth and felt him answer with a sound low in his chest.

By the time he pulled my shirt over my head, I was already reaching for his

Clothes became a short problem and then no problem at all

The fire burned in the other room. The cabin felt warm. The bed was small enough that there was no space wasted between us, and I liked that. I liked that there was nowhere else to be nowhere else to look

Calus kissed his way down my throat and across my chest, then lower, and I caught at him because the feel of it was already too much in the best way. He looked up at me once, checking, always checking even when he wanted more

“Yes,” I said.

He didn’t ask again.

When he touched me, I arched at once. My hand went to his hair. My breath caught. He took his time just long enough to make me want more, then gave it. I said his name again, and again, and I could feel him pleased by it, pleased by what he was doing to me

By the time he came back up to kiss me, I was done pretending I had any patience left.

“I need you,” I said.

His forehead touched mine for a second. “I know.”

Then he moved between my legs and entered me, and the first push made me close my eyes. It had been too long. I had missed this. Missed him. Missed the way my body knew him at once and opened for him like it had been waiting

He gave me a moment, and I held his face and looked at him.

“I’m fine,” I said.

That was all he needed

He began to move, and soon thought stopped mattering. There was only the bed under us the fire, his breath, my hands on him, his mouth on mine when I reached for it he kept one hand laced with mine against the blanket and the other at my hip, holding me in place as he gave me exactly what I had asked for ctri

Just honest

I kissed him when I could. I said his name when I couldn’t do anything else.

When pleasure rose in me, it rose fast. I tried to warn him, but it came apart in my throat. He understood anyway. He always did. He changed the angle and that was enough to push me over. I came with his name on my lips and my hand gripping his.

He followed not long after, his face against my neck, his body over mine, his breath ragged for the first time tonight.

For a while neither of us moved.

Then he lifted his head and looked at me.

I touched his face and smiled.

“That,” I said, “was worth asking for.”

He gave a quiet laugh and kissed me once.

“Yes,” he said. “It was.”

He shifted beside me and pulled me close and I let him, fitting myself against his side the way I fit there now without having to think about where to put myself.

The fire was still going in the other room. The wind was still in the pines. The cabin was warm and small and entirely ours for tonight.

I listened to his heartbeat slow back to normal under my hand.

“I didn’t want to wait anymore,” I said after a while.

“I know,” he said.

“I’m glad I said something.”

“So am I.”

I smiled against his chest and didn’t say anything else. There wasn’t anything else that needed saying. The night was outside and the feeling of waiting for something to be taken was further away than it had ever been.

Vaela was quiet.

Content.

So was I.

After a while I spoke without lifting my head.

It

?

shil ctrl

“We should bring food next time,” I said.

A quiet sound from him. “Is that what you’re thinking about right now?”

“I’m hungry,” I said.

“You’re always hungry.”

“That’s not true.”

“It’s mostly true.”

I smiled against his chest. “Fine. But we should still bring food.”

“Next time,” he said.

“Next time,” I agreed.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 177

Something good

(Caius)

Her stomach gave a small sound against my side.

I looked down at her.

“You really are hungry,” I said.

“I told you I was.”

“I thought you were making conversation.”

“I don’t make conversation about food,” she said. “If I say I’m hungry, I’m hungry.”

I looked at the window. The fire had burned down while we lay there and it was full dark outside, the deep dark of the middle of the night with the mountain quiet around us.

“There’s no food here,” I said.

“I know. That’s what I’ve been saying.”

I was quiet for a moment, thinking.

“I could hunt,” I said.

She lifted her head off my chest and looked at me.

“Now?”

“Now,” I said. “There’s game close to here. I know where it moves this time of night. I could bring something back and cook it. There’s a pit outside for that.”

She studied my face like she was checking whether I meant it.

“You’d go out there and catch us dinner,” she said.

“If you’re hungry, yes.”

Something moved through her expression. Not quite surprise. Closer to the look she got when I did something she wasn’t expecting and had to fit it into what she already knew about

“You don’t have to,” she said.

“I know I don’t have to.”

alt ctrl

Something good

“Then why offer?

I looked at her. “Because you’re hungry and I can fix it. That’s reason enough

She was quiet for a moment. Then she put her head back down on my chest

“I don’t want you to go,” she said.

“You just said you were hungry.”

“I am. I still don’t want you to go.”

“Those two things don’t work together,” I said.

“I know.” She pressed closer. “But if you go it means getting up, and getting cold, and being alone in here while you’re out there. I’d rather be hungry a little longer.”

I ran my hand along her back and didn’t say anything for a moment.

This was still new to her. Before me, no one had ever offered her anything without wanting something back. I could see her feeling the newness of it even now.

“I could be fast,” I said.

“How fast?”

“Fast enough that you’d still be warm when I got back.”

She thought about it.

“And you’d cook it out there?”

“Yes.

“So I’d have to get up anyway. To eat.”

“You’d have to get up to eat either way,” I said. “Unless you planned to stay in this bed forever.”

“I did plan that, actually.”

“You’d get hungry.”

“You keep bringing that up.”

I laughed, and I felt her smile against my chest.

We stayed there a while longer. The fire was almost gone now and the cold was starting to some into the room from from the edges, the way did when the hold back could feel her deciding She got quiet is the working through something and let

“Alright she said finally right wher?

work through without putting

Hunt. Bring back dinner? She lifted her head and looked at me But you but m back up first. So it’s warm when you get here

“I was going to do that any.”

se

“I know. I’m saying it so know I want it done

I looked at her. “You ving me orders now

“I’m telling you want,” she said. “You told me I could

I had told her permissio plain and warm.

rlier tonight, back at the pack house, I’d told her she never had to something, that all she had to do was say it. And here she was ere she was saying pology, telling the Alpha King to build up the fire before he

I did liked it more than I knew how to tell her

The fire, then the hunt.”

er.”

down and kissed her once, then got up before I talked myself into staying was cold under my feet. I built the fire back up the way she’d asked, feeding it until and held and the light of it e blanket pulled up to h he long,” she said ain, Isla watched me from the bed waiting then.”

shift

It ctri

Something good

I looked at her over my shoulder. “You’re very particular about dinner for someone who fo to bring any.”

“That was both of us. You said so yourself.”

I had said that.

I went to the door. Behind me the fire was going strong and Isla was warm in the bed and cabin was exactly what she’d wanted it to be, just us, nothing else, nowhere we had to be.

I stood at the door a moment before I opened it.

Behind me she was already settling back into the blankets, her eyes half closed, warm in a way that had nothing to do with the fire. I looked at her longer than I needed to.

There was a time I came to this cabin to be alone. To think, to breathe, to be somewhere n one wanted anything from me. I never once pictured someone in that bed while I hunted. I never pictured coming back to anyone at all.

Now there was Isla, waiting for me to bring her something to eat, giving me orders about th fire, telling me not to be long. The cabin felt different with her in it. Not smaller. Fuller.

Vorak stirred at the thought of the run.

‘She’ll be here when we get back,‘ he said.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘She will.‘

That was the part I kept turning over. Not the hunt. Not the cold. Just the plain fact that whe

I came back through that door, she’d still be here.

I’d spent years learning to need no one.

She’d undone that without trying.

“I’ll be back before you miss me,” I said.

“I already miss you,” she said. “Go so you can come back.”

I opened the door to the cold night and Vorak came forward in me, ready to run, ready to hunt ready to bring something back for her.

Then I stepped out and let the shift take me.

4 on for this

Built for this

(Calus)

The shift took me between one step and the next.

The cold that had been on my skin turned into nothing. Vorak came up through me the way he always did out here, without being called, glad to be let out. My feet hit the ground as paws and the clearing changed around me. The dark that had been dark to the man wasn’t dark to the wolf. I could see the tree line, the gaps between the pines, the shape of the ridge past the clearing, all of it clear in shades of grey and silver like the night had thinned out just for me.

This was the part I never got tired of.

The world opened up. Sound came first. The wind moving through the high branches. Something small shifting in the brush near the porch. Water running somewhere off to the east, the stream that cut down the mountain and pooled below the ridge. I knew that stream.

Game came to it at night.

Iran.

Vorak stretched into it and the trees started moving past faster than any man could take them. This was mine in a way almost nothing else was. Not the crown, not the pack house, not the weight of every decision that waited for me there. Just this. The ground under me and the speed I was built for and no one to hold it back from.

I didn't have to hold it back tonight.

When I ran beside Isla I kept Vorak slow, matched her stride, let her set the pace while she learned what her legs could do. There was no shame in it. She was new to her wolf and I would run at her side as long as she needed me there. But she wasn't here now. She was warm in the cabin, waiting. Out here alone there was no reason to keep anything in check.

So I let go.

The forest opened ahead of me and I took the slope down toward the stream at full stretch, dodging the trees without slowing, reading the ground three strides ahead of where my feet landed. A root here. A dip there. A fallen branch I cleared without breaking pace. My body knew this mountain. I'd run it a hundred times alone and it had never once caught me out.

Halfway down I caught the scent.

Deer. Two of them, maybe three, moving near the water. The wind was coming up the slope toward me, which meant they hadn't caught mine yet. Good. I slowed and let Vorak drop low, and the speed folded down into something quieter. This was the other half of it. Not just running fast but knowing when to stop running. The hunt wasn't only legs. It was patience.

I moved through the trees without sound.

The dark helped me and hid them not at all. I could see them now through a gap in the pines, two of them, a doe and a young buck, heads down at the edge of the stream where the ground went soft. They didn't know I was there. I held still and watched and let them settle, let them believe they were alone at the water.

I picked the buck.

The doe was closer but the buck was bigger and there was more meat on him, and I wasn't out here to bring back the easy one. Isla wanted something good. I'd bring her something good.

I circled.

The wind was still with me and I used it, working around to come at him from the side where a fallen pine would break his line of sight until the last moment. Every step went down without a sound. Vorak knew this. He'd done it more times than I could count, and the two of us moved as one thing, patient and low and getting closer with the buck none the wiser.

Ten strides out I stopped.

The buck lifted his head. Something had reached him. Not me, not yet, but some warning that lives in prey, the thing that tells them the night has changed. His ears turned. His body went still. He was about to bolt.

I didn't give him the chance.

I came out of the dark at full speed and the distance closed before he finished the turn. He was fast. Deer are fast. But nothing on this mountain is faster than me and he learned that in the last second of it. I took him down clean at the edge of the water, one hard drive of weight and teeth, and it was over quicker than it takes to tell. No drawn out thing. No suffering strung out longer than it had to be. My father taught me that too. You hunt clean or you don't hunt.

The doe was already gone, crashing up the far bank and into the trees. I let her go. I had what I came for

I stood over the buck for a moment, breathing, Vorak satisfied in the way he only ever was after a run like that. The stream ran past. The cold came off the water. Above the tree line the sky was black and full of stars, the kind you never saw from the pack house with its lamps

Built for and its windows all lit.

I thought about Isla back in the cabin.

She'd be warm under the blankets by now, the fire d built going strong waiting for me the way she said she would. The thought pulled at me to get back to her. But there was work first. You didn't drag a whole carcass through the trees if you didnt have to and wast going to bring it into the cabin to deal with in front of her

1 shifted back.

The cold hit me at once, the man's skin bare against the mountain night, but didn't feel it much. I never did right after a run. There was a stone shelf near the stream used before flat and clean, and I worked there in the dark. The wolf's eyes were gone but mine had adjusted enough, and there was starlight and the pale line of the water to work by look what we needed and left the rest for the mountain. Nothing went to waste out there. Whatever I left, something else would come for before morning.

By the time I finished the sky hadn't changed. Still deep night. I'd been faster than told her

I stood and looked back up the slope toward the cabin, though I couldn't see it through the trees. Somewhere up there was a fire and a bed and a woman whold told me to bring back something good and not to be long.

I'd managed both.

I gathered what I'd taken, shifted one last time with the meat held safe, and started back up the mountain toward her. Vorak ran easy now, unhurried, the hunt done and nothing left to prove.

Just the climb, and Isla at the end of it.

For years this mountain had been the place I came to be alone. Tonight it was just the thing standing between me and her.

I ran toward her.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 178

A simple night

(Caius)

I reached the cabin a few minutes later.

25 Ponts

I shifted before I reached the porch and carried the meat over to the fire pit. The wood beside it was still dry, and it didn't take long to get the fire going again. Once it caught, I set the grate over it and started getting the meat ready.

The cabin door opened behind me.

I looked over and found Isla standing there with the blanket wrapped around her.

“I thought you were waiting inside,” I said.

She smiled.

“I was.”

“Then why are you out here?”

“Because you came back.”

I looked at her for a moment before smiling.

“I won’t be long.”

“I know.”

She walked over and sat on the bench beside the fire. The blanket was still wrapped around her, and she tucked her feet up beneath it. She watched me without saying anything while I laid the first pieces of meat over the grate.

“It smells good already,” she said.

“It’ll smell better in a few minutes.”

“I’m looking forward to that.”

I turned the meat and looked over at her.

For a while neither of us spoke. The fire did its job, and the mountain was quiet around us.

I turned the meat. It didn’t need much longer. I’d promised Isla dinner, and I intended to keep that promise the same way I kept every other one. Some promises changed a person’s life. Others were as simple as making sure they didn’t go to bed hungry.

I checked the meat one last time before taking the first piece off the grate.

The smell had already reached Isla. She watched every move I made like she was trying to remember it. I found two plates inside the cabin and brought them back out. I gave hers to her first before making one for myself.

I looked up from the fire.

Isla hadn’t said another word. She didn’t seem to mind the silence. Every now and then our eyes met, and she’d smile before looking back at the fire. It was easy sitting out here with her. Easier than I ever expected it would be.

She took another bite and looked at me.

“This is so good.”

“You sound surprised.”

“I am.”

“There’s barely any seasoning.”

I smiled.

“You’re a wolf.”

She looked at me.

“You don’t need to season everything,” I said. She smiled and nodded in agreement.

We ate in silence after that.

There wasn’t much left by the time we finished eating.

I set my plate aside and looked at Isla. She looked comfortable sitting here. I’d wanted tonight to be simple for her and somehow it turned out that way. That pleased me more than I expected.

She noticed me watching her. “What is it?”

“I was just thinking.”

“About what?” she asked.

“That you look happy.” Something changed in her expression.

She held my gaze for a moment before she smiled.

“I am.”

Her voice was quiet, but there wasn’t any doubt in it.

“I’m happy just being here with you.”

I didn’t answer straight away.

Lolote

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 179

There wasn’t anything I could say that would mean more than those words already did. I reached across the space between us and rested my hand against her cheek. She leaned into it without thinking, and I closed the distance between us and kissed her.

It wasn’t a long kiss.

Just enough to tell her what I couldn’t find the words for. When I drew back, she was still smiling.

“I love seeing you like this,” I said.

“So do I.”

She took my hand and held it between both of hers.

“I never thought life could be this simple.”

“It won’t always be.”

“I know.”

She looked into my eyes.

“But as long as I have you, I think I’ll be alright.”

I brushed my thumb over her hand.

“You will.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you won’t be facing any of it alone again.”

She looked at me for a long moment.

“I’m glad you accepted me that day.”

I frowned slightly.

“In the shack.”

delete

Astmple night

I knew exactly which day she meant.

“I didn’t even have a wolf then,” she said. “I wasn’t an Alpha. I wasn’t a Beta. I wasn’t anything”

“You were Isla.”

She smiled, but there was sadness in it.

“A lot of Alphas wouldn’t have seen it that way.”

“They would’ve seen a weak human standing in front of them.”

I didn’t answer.

“They would’ve rejected me without even thinking about it.”

I reached for her hand again.

“I’m not a lot of Alphas.”

“I know.”

She looked down for a moment before meeting my eyes again.

“I’ve thought about it more than once.”

“About what?”

“What would’ve happened if someone else had found me first.”

I didn’t like the thought.

“I don’t think I’d still be here.”

“You are.”

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 180

“Because you found me.”

I shook my head.

“No.”

She looked at me.

“You’re here because you kept fighting, even when you thought there wasn’t anything left to fight for.”

A small smile crossed her face.

“You still gave me a chance

“I would’ve given you that chance no matter who you we

She searched my face

“Really?”

I nodded once.

1 would’ve accepted you whether you were an Omega, a Beta, an Alpha, or someone with no wolf at all.”

Her eyes didn’t leave mine.

“Why?”

“Because none of those things tell me who you are”

She was quiet.

“I don’t judge people by rank.”

I held her gaze.

“I never have.”

“My father taught me that respect is earned by the choices a person makes, not by the title they carry.”

She smiled.

“You really mean that.”

“I do.”

I lifted her hand and kissed the back of it.

“I would never reject you because of your rank.”

My voice was calm.

“I’m not like that.”

A tear slipped down her cheek before she could stop it.

I brushed it away with my thumb.

“You don’t have to cry”

M‘ delete

25 Punte

SA simple night

“I’m not crying because I’m sad.”

“No?”

She laughed through the tears.

“I’m crying because I spent so many years believing nobody would ever choose me.”

I leaned forward until our foreheads touched.

“I chose you the moment I caught the scent of wolfsbane coming from that shack and followed it on instinct.”

Her lips parted slightly. “You walked toward me when everyone else had walked away.”

“Because walking away was never an option.”

She closed the distance between us and kissed me.

When we pulled apart, she rested her forehead against mine again.

“I love you, Caius.”

“I love you too.”

“I’ll never get tired of saying it.”

“Then don’t.”

“I won’t.”

I smiled.

“And I’ll never get tired of hearing it.”

Tomorrow would come with its own demands. The council would still be waiting, and so would everything that came with the crown. Tonight belonged to us. I wasn’t willing to give even a moment of it away.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 181

A simple night

125 Polit

A simple night

(Caius)

I reached the cabin a few minutes later.

I shifted before I reached the porch and carried the meat over to the fire pit. The wood beside it was still dry, and it didn’t take long to get the fire going again. Once it caught, I set the grate over it and started getting the meat ready.

The cabin door opened behind me.

I looked over and found Isla standing there with the blanket wrapped around her

“I thought you were waiting inside,” I said.

She smiled.

“I was.”

“Then why are you out here?”

“Because you came back.”

I looked at her for a moment before smiling.

“I won’t be long.”

“I know.”

She walked over and sat on the bench beside the fire. The blanket was still wrapped around her, and she tucked her feet up beneath it. She watched me without saying anything while I laid the first pieces of meat over the grate.

“It smells good already,” she said.

“It’ll smell better in a few minutes.”

“I’m looking forward to that.”

I turned the meat and looked over at her.

For a while neither of us spoke. The fire did its job, and the mountain was quiet around us.

I turned the meat. It didn’t need much longer. I’d promised Isla dinner, and I intended to keep that promise the same way I kept every other one. Some promises changed a person’s life. Others were as simple as making sure they didn’t go to bed hungry.

I checked the meat one last time before taking the first piece off the grate.

A simple night

The smell had already reached Isla. She watched every move I made like she was trying to remember it. I found two plates inside the cabin and brought them back out. I gave hers to her first before making one for myself.

I looked up from the fire.

Isla hadn’t said another word. She didn’t seem to mind the silence. Every now and then our eyes met, and she’d smile before looking back at the fire. It was easy sitting out here with her. Easier than I ever expected it would be.

She took another bite and looked at me.

“This is so good.”

“You sound surprised.”

“I am.”

“There’s barely any seasoning.”

I smiled.

“You’re a wolf.”

She looked at me.

“You don’t need to season everything,” I said. She smiled and nodded in agreement.

We ate in silence after that.

There wasn’t much left by the time we finished eating.

I set my plate aside and looked at Isla. She looked comfortable sitting here. I’d wanted tonight to be simple for her and somehow it turned out that way. That pleased me more than I expected.

She noticed me watching her. “What is it?”

“I was just thinking.”

“About what?” she asked.

“That you look happy.” Something changed in her expression.

She held my gaze for a moment before she smiled.

“I am.”

Her voice was quiet, but there wasn’t any doubt in it.

I’m happy just being here with you.”

A simple night

I didn’t answer straight away.

There wasn’t anything I could say that would mean more than those words already did. I reached across the space between us and rested my hand against her cheek. She leaned into it without thinking, and I closed the distance between us and kissed her.

It wasn’t a long kiss.

Just enough to tell her what I couldn’t find the words for. When I drew back, she was still smiling.

“I love seeing you like this,” I said.

“So do I.”

She took my hand and held it between both of hers.

“I never thought life could be this simple.”

“It won’t always be.”

“I know.”

She looked into my eyes.

“But as long as I have you, I think I’ll be alright.”

I brushed my thumb over her hand.

“You will.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you won’t be facing any of it alone again.”

She looked at me for a long moment.

“I’m glad you accepted me that day.”

I frowned slightly.

“In the shack.”

I knew exactly which day she meant.

“I didn’t even have a wolf then,” she said. “I wasn’t an Alpha. I wasn’t a Beta. I wasn’t anything.”

“You were Isla.”

She smiled, but there was sadness in it.

“A lot of Alphas wouldn’t have seen it that way.”

A simple night

“They would’ve seen a weak human standing in front of them.”

I didn’t answer.

“They would’ve rejected me without even thinking about it.”

I reached for her hand again.

“I’m not a lot of Alphas.”

“I know.”

She looked down for a moment before meeting my eyes again.

“I’ve thought about it more than once.”

“About what?”

“What would’ve happened if someone else had found me first.”

I didn’t like the thought.

“I don’t think I’d still be here.”

“You are.”

“Because you found me.

I shook my head.

“No.”

She looked at me.

“You’re here because you kept fighting, even when you thought there wasn’t anything left to fight for.

A small smile crossed her face.

“You still gave me a chance.”

“I would’ve given you that chance no matter who you were.”

She searched my face.

“Really?”

I nodded once.

“I would’ve accepted you whether you were an Omega, a Beta, an Alpha, or someone with no wolf at all.”

A simple night

Her eyes didn’t leave mine.

“Why?”

“Because none of those things tell me who you are.”

She was quiet.

“I don’t judge people by rank.”

I held her gaze.

“I never have.”

“My father taught me that respect is earned by the choices a person makes, not by the title they carry.”

She smiled.

“You really mean that.”

“I do.”

I lifted her hand and kissed the back of it.

“I would never reject you because of your rank.”

My voice was calm.

“I’m not like that.”

A tear slipped down her cheek before she could stop it.

with my thumb.

I brushed it away with

“You don’t have to cry.”

“I’m not crying because I’m sad.”

“No?”

She laughed through the tears.

“I’m crying because I spent so many years believing nobody would ever choose me.

I leaned forward until our foreheads touched.

“I chose you the moment I caught the scent of wolfsbane coming from that shack and followed it on instinct.”

Her lips parted slightly. “You walked toward me when everyone else had walked away.”

A simple night

“Because walking away was never an option.”

She closed the distance between us and kissed me.

When we pulled apart, she rested her forehead against mine again.

“I love you, Caius.”

“I love you too.”

“I’ll never get tired of saying it.”

“Then don’t.”

“I won’t.”

I smiled.

“And I’ll never get tired of hearing it.”

Tomorrow would come with its own demands. The council would still be waiting, and so would everything that came with the crown. Tonight belonged to us. I wasn’t willing to give even a moment of it away.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 182

No other choice

No other choice

(Isla)

I didn’t know why I was crying.

Not really. Nothing bad had happened. Nobody had hurt me. The night had been good, genuinely good, the kind of good I was still learning to trust when it arrived without something underneath is waiting to pull it back.

And yet here I was with tears on my face and Caius’s forehead against mine and no explanation fo any of it.

I laughed at myself a little. “I don’t even know why I’m crying.”

“You don’t have to know,” he said.

“It’s embarrassing,” I said. “In Ashcrest I learned not to cry where anyone could see it. Even when they whipped me in that yard I didn’t give them the satisfaction.” I looked away. “And now I’m sitting here on a mountain with a full stomach crying over nothing.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment.

“Maybe that’s why,” he said.

I looked at him.

“Because there’s finally room for it,” he said.

I didn’t have anything to say to that. I looked away instead and let the last of it pass and when it did I wiped my face and felt more like myself again.

I pulled back slightly and looked at him. He wasn't flustered by it. He wasn't trying to talk me out of it or make it stop. He just sat there with his hand over mine and let it be what it was.

"Tell me something you've never told anyone," I said.

He looked at me. "That's a broad request.

"I know," I said. "Pick something."

He was quiet for a moment.

"I used to think the territory was enough," he said. "The crown. The council. The work of it. I built everything around it because it was what I was made for and I was good at it and that seemed like enough of a reason."

No other choice

I waited.

"But there was always something underneath it," he said. "Not unhappiness. Just a version of m that wanted something that had nothing to do with any of it. Something ordinary. I didn't know what that looked like. I couldn't have told you what I was missing because I didn't have a name it."

"And now?" I said.

He looked at me.

"Now I know what it is," he said. "It's this. Mornings with you. Sitting outside on a mountain eating something I caught myself. None of it matters to the territory. None of it requires the crown."

I didn't say anything for a moment.

"It's just ours," I said.

"Yes," he said. "Just ours."

I sat with that for a while. The sky above us was still full of stars and the mountain didn't ask anything from either of us.

I leaned into him slightly and he adjusted without being asked, his arm coming around me the way it did now, automatic and easy.

"We should go inside," I said. "It's getting cold."

“You said that earlier,” he said.

“I mean it this time,” I said.

He stood and pulled me up with him and we went back into the cabin and the warmth of it came around us immediately.

I got into the bed and he got in on top of me. I raised my eyebrow, and he looked down at me like he already knew what I was about to say.

“I thought we were coming in here to sleep.”

His mouth turned at one corner.

“You really thought that after all of that we would sleep.”

I laughed once. “I thought it was possible.”

“It was never possible.”

He kissed me before I could answer. One hand slid to my waist and held me in place while his mouth moved over mine, deeper this time, with none of the care he used when he thought I mi break. I liked that he knew better now.

He kissed me before I could answer. One hand slid to my waist and held me in place while his mouth moved over mine, deeper this time, with none of the care he used when he thought I mig break. I liked that he knew better now.

I put my hands on him and kissed him back just as hard. The blanket was twisted under us by the time he lifted his head.

“Still cold?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“Good.”

He kissed my throat, then lower, and I let my head fall back and closed my eyes. My hands went into his hair. I could feel him smile against my skin before he moved down farther.

“Caius.”

A quiet sound from him, then his hand slid up my leg and parted my thighs. He looked at me once, and I knew what he was asking.

“Yes,” I said.

He touched me and I drew in a breath at once. The room was warm, the fire still going, the bed small under us. There was nowhere to go but into it, and I did. He took his time just enough to make me reach for him, then gave me more.

By the time he came back up, I was already pulling him to me.

He kissed me once, hard enough to make my breath catch, then settled between my legs and pushed inside.

I held on to him and let out a sound I did not mean to make.

“Still think we were sleeping?” he asked.

“Shut up,” I said, and he laughed into my mouth.

He moved again and thought stopped mattering. I wrapped my legs around him and took what he gave me, then asked for more without needing words. He gave me that too.

When I came, I buried my face against his neck and said his name like a prayer.

He followed soon after, pressed over me, breath rough, one hand holding mine against the bed.

No other choice

#25 Panipa

‘You’ve had your chance, now it’s mine.‘ Vaela said out of nowhere. Before I could stop her, she took control of my body and pushed caius so his back hit the mattress.

He looked up at me at once. Surprise first. Then heat.

Vaela came alive within me, pleased, awake, wanting.

‘Mine, she said. ‘Then after, it’s Vorak’s turn.’

I feel myself climbing over him and putting my hands on his chest. He didn’t touch me yet. He just watched, giving Vaela room to choose. That was Caius. Even now.

He smiled up at me, making no effort to hurry the moment. He didn’t reach for me. He simply waited, and somehow I knew he understood this wasn’t only about us anymore. Vaela and Vorak deserved this moment too.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 183

Just ours

(Isla)

Vaela leaned over him and kissed him first.

Not the way I kissed him.

This was more hungry. More sure. Like she had waited long enough and had no interest in waiting any longer.

Caius let her take it. His hands stayed at his sides for one moment more, giving her the space to lead, and then one came to my hip when she pressed down against him.

A low sound left him.

Vaela liked that.

She sat up over him and looked down at him through my eyes, one hand still on his chest, the other moving between us. I felt everything she felt. The want. The claim in it. The deep animal joy of having him under us, wanting us, ready.

“Mine,” she said aloud this time.

Caius looked up at her and there was no mockery in him, ho question. Just heat and a strange calm acceptance that made something in me give way.

“Yes,” he said.

That was all she needed.

She took him in hand and guided him back inside us, and the first push made my whole body draw taut. Vaela braced her hands on his chest and took him deep, setting the pace herself. Hard. Clean. Certain. Caius watched her the whole time like he was studying something sacred and dangerous at once.

His hands moved to my hips then, helping but not taking over. Letting her lead. Letting her use him.

I could feel his control straining.

Vaela could too.

She smiled.

“You wait well,” she said.

Just ours

His mouth turned once. “I’ve had practice.”

That made me laugh, but Vaela pushed down again and thought vanished under pleasure. The room narrowed to skin, breath, heat, and the bond between all four of us pulling wide open. I felt Vorak there too now, awake in the bond, watching through Caius with open approval, possession, want.

Vaela leaned down and bit Caius lightly at the throat, then rode him harder.

He broke then.

His hands gripped my hips and his head tipped back as he came with a rough sound he did not hide.

Vaela took what she wanted from it, then bent to kiss him again, satisfied.

She climbed off him and lay beside him for a moment, breathing hard, while Caius looked up at me like he still had not decided whether to laugh or drag me right back on top of him.

Vaela was pleased with herself.

Very pleased.

Inside me, she stretched with that lazy sort of pride that came after getting exactly what she wanted.

‘Mine‘, she said again.

Caius reached for me and brushed his hand over my side. “Isla?”

“I am here,” I said.

His eyes moved over my face, checking. Making sure it was me now. Making sure I was all right.

I leaned down and kissed him once. “She is unbearable when she gets her way.

His mouth curved. “I had noticed.”

Vaela gave one last satisfied purr and settled back enough for me to feel fully like myself again, though the heat she left behind had not gone anywhere.

Caius rolled and pulled me back against him, one arm around my waist, his mouth at my throat.

“Now,” he said, voice low, “do I get you back, or is Vaela still planning on ruining me?”

I turned in his arms and looked at him. “You say that like you did not enjoy it.”

His hand slid up my side. “I did not say that.”

Just ours

I kissed him before he could say more, and he answered at once, firm and hungry, one hand coming to the back of my neck.

This time it was different.

Not Vaela taking what she wanted.

Just us again.

His hand found mine and held it to the bed while his mouth moved over mine, then to my throat then back again. He settled over me and pushed inside me with a deep, clean thrust that made me gasp.

I wrapped my legs around him and held on.

He kissed me through every sound I made, and when he came, he buried his face against my neck like he needed the closeness as much as I did.

I held him there after, both of us spent, tangled in the blankets with the fire still burning beside us.

I stayed where I was, listening to the sound of our breathing as it settled back into something familiar.

The fire had burned lower while the night carried on around us, and the cabin felt quieter than it had before. Caius pressed a kiss to my forehead without saying anything. I smiled to myself and closed my eyes, thinking that if peace had a place, it might look exactly like this.

I stayed where I was, my head resting against his chest.

His hand moved over my back in quiet circles, and I felt myself relax even more. I tried to keep my eyes open, but they refused to listen.

“Tired?” he asked.

“Mhm.”

He kissed the top of my head.

“Sleep.”

I smiled to myself.

I didn’t remember closing my eyes. The next thing I knew, I was drifting off with his arms still around me.

When I opened my eyes again, light was beginning to find its way through the window.

I stayed where I was for a moment, not moving. Calus’s arm was still around me, just as it had

Just ours been when I’d fallen asleep. I smiled to myself before looking up at him. He was still asleep, looking more peaceful than I’d ever seen him:

I watched him for another moment.

It was strange seeing him like this. The Alpha King everyone respected wasn’t what I saw right now. There was only Caius, the man who’d held me through the night and never once made me question that I belonged beside him.

I reached up carefully and brushed a strand of hair away from his forehead.

He didn’t wake.

A small smile found its way onto my face.

I stayed where I was, not wanting to wake him. If this morning could stay like this a little longer, I wasn’t going to be the one to end it.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 184

Just a little longer

(Caius)

I woke to her watching me.

She didn’t look away when my eyes opened. She just lay there on her side with her head on the pillow and looked at me the way she looked at things she was thinking about, directly and without apology.

“How long have you been awake?” I asked.

“A while,” she said.

“Doing what?”

“Watching you sleep.”

I looked at her. “And?”

“You look different when you sleep,” she said. “Less like you’re running something.”

She smiled slightly. “I meant it as a compliment.”

“I know,” I said.

Vorak was content in a way that didn’t ask for anything or push toward anything. Just settled.

I turned onto my side to face her.

She didn’t move back. She stayed where she was and let the space between us close and I put my hand on her face and she turned into it without thinking about it.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Good morning,” I said.

We stayed like that for a while.

“Are you hungry?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “But I don’t want to move yet.”

“Then don’t,” I said.

She looked at me. “We should probably head back soon.”

“Soon” I said. “Not yet.”

She settled back against the pillow and looked at the ceiling.

Just a little longer

“Tell me something else,” she said.

“About what?”

“About you,” she said. “Last night we got distracted.”

“What do you want to know?” I asked.

“Something you haven’t told me yet,” she said. “Not the crown. Not the territory. Something else.”

“When I was seventeen,” I said, “I made a decision that cost someone their position in the guard Someone who had been loyal to my father for years. I was wrong about what they’d done and I moved too fast and by the time I understood that the damage was already done.

She turned her head to look at me.

“What happened to them?” she asked.

“They left Wraithbone,” I said. “I tried to make it right afterward but they didn’t want anything from me by then.”

“Did you ever see them again?”

“Once,” I said. “Years later. I apologized. They accepted it. But it didn’t change what the decision had cost them.”

She was quiet for a moment. “How old were you again?”

“Seventeen,” I said.

“That’s young to be making decisions that size,” she said.

“Yes,” I said. “I didn’t know that at the time.”

“What did you learn from it?”

“That moving fast and being right aren’t the same thing,” I said. “And that an apology after the fact is worth less than the caution you didn’t use before it.”

She looked back at the ceiling.

“Is that why you’re so careful now?” she asked.

“Partly,” I said. “My father taught me caution. That taught me what it cost when I didn’t use it.”

She was quiet for a moment. “You were harder on yourself about it than anyone else was.

I looked at her. “What makes you say that?”

“Because that’s how you work,” she said. “You hold yourself to a standard nobody else is applying.

Just a little longer

I didn’t answer that.

She turned her head and looked at me. “I’m not saying it’s wrong. I’m just saying I noticed.”

“When did you notice that?” I asked.

“Early,” she said. “Before I understood most things about you, I understood that.”

Outside the birds had started and the light through the window had shifted.

“We should head back,” she said eventually.

“Yes,” I said.

She didn’t move immediately. Neither did I.

After a while she sat up and pushed her hair back and looked at me.

“Is there a shower here?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Small but it works.”

She got up without another word and I followed her in.

The shower was small enough that there wasn’t much room between us and neither of us tried to create any. She washed her hair and I washed mine and the water ran hot longer than I expected it to for a cabin that hadn’t been used in months.

She looked up at me at one point while the water was still running

“You really did think of everything when you built this place,” she said.

“My father built it,” I said.

She looked around the small space. “Then he thought of everything.”

“He usually did,” I said.

We finished without rushing and she wrapped herself in the one towel I found under the sink and looked at me while I used the other.

“We should come back in summer,” she said.

“Yes,” I said. “We should.”

We got dressed and moved around the small cabin without getting in each other’s way, the ease of two people who had stopped needing to think about where the other one was.

Isla appeared beside me at the window.

Just a little longer

“I like it here,” she said.

“I know,” I said.

She looked up at me. “I had fun last night.”

I looked at her. “Which part?”

She smiled. “All of it.”

“So did I,” I said.

She picked up her bag and I followed her out.

We started down the trail together.

After a few minutes Isla looked over at me.

“Do you think anyone noticed we were gone?”

“Probably.”

“They’ll ask questions.”

“They usually do.”

She smiled.

“What are you going to tell them?”

“The truth.”

She looked curious.

“And what’s that?”

I glanced at her.

“That I took my mate away for a night.”

She laughed.

“I think they’ll work the rest out for themselves.”

I smiled and kept walking, happy to let them.

We could’ve shifted.

The run back would’ve taken a fraction of the time. Instead, Isla kept walking beside me, her hand in mine, never once looking at the tree line the way wolves usually did when they were ready to run.

Just a little longer

“You don’t want to shift,” I said.

She smiled.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because this walk ends too soon if we do.”

I looked at her for a moment.

“Then we’ll walk.”

She smiled and moved a little closer to me.

Neither of us said anything after that. There wasn’t any need to. We kept walking at the same easy pace, our hands still linked, letting the mountain keep us for a little while longer before the world found us again.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 185

Quiet paths

(Isla)

Walking beside Caius felt different.

Maybe it was because neither of us was in a hurry. Maybe it was because I'd chosen to stay in my human form. Either way, I was glad we hadn't shifted.

I looked over at him.

His eyes were on the path ahead, but his hand never left mine. There had been a time when I thought simple things like this belonged to other people.

"You've gone quiet," he said.

"I was thinking."

"About?"

"How different everything feels."

He glanced at me.

"In a good way?"

"The best way."

He smiled, and we kept walking.

For a while neither of us said anything.

I didn't mind the silence. It wasn't the uncomfortable kind I'd grown up with, where silence meant someone was angry or waiting for me to make a mistake. This silence was easy. It gave me room to think.

"I've been wondering something," I said.

"What?"

“Did you ever imagine any of this?”

He looked at me.

“What part?”

“You and me.”

He smiled.

“No.”

“Not even once?”

“I hoped I’d find my mate one day,” he said. “I never imagined who she’d be.”

I looked down at our hands.

“I used to hope I wouldn’t have a mate.”

He frowned slightly.

“Why?”

“Because I thought whoever it was would reject me the moment they realized I didn’t have a wolf

He stopped walking.

I looked up at him.

“I’m sorry you ever had to believe that,” he said.

I shrugged.

“It seemed like the most likely outcome.”

He lifted our joined hands and kissed the back of mine.

“It was never going to happen with me.”

I smiled.

“I know.”

We started walking again, our hands still linked.

After another few minutes he slowed.

“Come here.”

I looked at him curiously as he led me a few steps off the trail.

“What is it?”

He pointed toward a large oak.

“I carved my initials into that tree when I was fifteen.”

I laughed.

“You?”

“I regretted it as soon as my father found it.”

“What did he do?”

“He made me spend the afternoon planting new trees.”

I smiled.

“I think that was a fair punishment.”

He laughed.

“So did he.”

I walked over to the tree and found the carving.

It had faded with time, but it was still there. I ran my fingers over the letters before looking back at him.

“You never came back to remove it?”

He shook his head.

“My father told me to leave it.”

“Why?”

“So I’d remember that every choice leaves something behind.”

His answer stayed with me for a moment.

“He sounds like he taught through everything.”

“He did.”

I looked at the carving for another moment.

It wasn’t much. Just a few letters in an old tree. But somehow it made him seem younger to me, easier to picture as the boy he had once been before the crown, before the responsibility, before everyone had looked to him for answers.

I was still learning new things about him, and I hoped I never stopped.

I took one last look before stepping away.

It made me wonder how many memories this mountain was holding for him. Some were probably happy. Others probably weren’t, I wanted to know them all one day, not because they changed who he was, but because they had helped make him the man I loved.

I slipped my hand back into his.

Quiet paths

“Ready?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Ready.”

We walked for another few minutes without speaking.

I realized I wasn’t trying to fill the silence anymore. Being beside him was enough. Somehow, it always was.

I looked down at our hands.

Not so long ago I’d believed nobody would ever want to hold mine. Now Caius reached for it without thinking.

The thought stayed with me as we continued down the trail, and I couldn’t help feeling grateful for everything that had brought us here together.

After a while, the trees began to thin again.

I could see more of the familiar paths ahead, and I knew we were getting closer. Part of me wanted to keep walking anyway, just to make this morning last a little longer.

“You’ve done that twice now,” Caius said.

“What?”

“You looked ahead and sighed.”

Haughed quietly.

“I don’t want this morning to end.”

He gave my hand a gentle squeeze.

“It doesn’t have to.”

A bird flew across the path in front of us.

I watched it disappear through the trees before looking back at Caius.

“You’ve spent years walking these trails.”

“I have.”

“And now you’re sharing them with me.”

“I want to.”

Quiet paths

There was something about hearing him say it so simply that made my chest feel warm.

I couldn’t imagine ever getting tired of moments like this.

I looked ahead again.

Plaines

For so long I’d believed I didn’t have a future worth thinking about. Every day had been about surviving until the next one came. Now I found myself wondering what the next year would look like, then the one after that, and somehow none of it frightened me anymore.

It wasn’t because life had suddenly become easy.

It was because I wasn’t walking toward it alone. Caius had changed that without ever asking me to become someone else. He’d simply taken my hand, and somewhere along the way I’d stopped being afraid to follow him.

1 let out a quiet breath.

There was still so much I wanted to learn about him. Not because I thought there were parts of him missing, but because every story he shared made me understand him a little more. I wanted to know them all one day.

Not today. Today was for quiet moments, easy conversations, and letting myself enjoy something I'd once believed I would never have.

Right now, it was enough to walk beside him with nowhere else I wanted to be. Without realizing when it had happened, I'd stopped being afraid of the future. It had become something I could look forward to, one step at a time, with Caius beside me.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 186

The next report

(Caius)

Pryor was in the office when I got there.

He looked up when I came in and didn't say anything about the cabin or the night or any of it. That was or of the things I valued most about him. He handled what needed handling and left everything else alone.

"The terms," I said.

He slid the document across the desk.

I sat down and read through it properly. Every condition. Every restriction. The reporting requirements, the movement limitations, the permanent record, the no contact clause. It was exactly what Isla had asked for and exactly what the situation called for, not lenient, not excessive, precise in the way things needed to be precise when they were going to follow someone for the rest of their life.

I read it twice.

Then I signed it.

"Send it today," I said.

"I'll have it out within the hour," Pryor said.

I set the pen down and sat back and looked at the document for a moment before Pryor took it.

That was it.

Fifteen years of Brent Thorne existing as a problem without a solution, first as Isla's brother who hurt her, then as a prisoner with a pending sentence, then as a man living in a settlement he had no right to be in because a woman felt the bond and made a decision. All of it reduced now to a document on its way south with conditions attached.

Not finished. Nothing like this ever truly was. But handled.

Pryor left and I stayed where I was.

The office was quiet. The morning had moved past the early hours and into the part of the day where everything started arriving at once, correspondence, reports, whatever the pack had accumulated overnight and was now ready to put in front of me. I could see the stack on the corner of the desk from where I sat.

I didn't reach for it yet.

I thought about the cabin instead. The fire. Isla sitting across from me at the small table eating without ceremony. What she'd said about not crying in Ashcrest and then crying on a mountain when nothing was wrong. What I'd told her about being seventeen and moving too fast and the cost of it. Things I hadn't said out loud before because there hadn't been anyone to say them to

She'd listened the way she listened to everything, fully and without trying to manage what she heard into something more comfortable.

The next repert

I'd come to this work from a long time of doing it alone. Not just the Alpha King work. All of it. The decisions, the weight of therm, the silence that came after handling something significant with nobody to put it down in front of. I'd built a life that didn't require sharing any of that because sharing it had never been an option.

Now it was.

That was still new enough that I noticed it. Not uncomfortably. Just as a fact I was still adjusting to, the way you adjusted to something that changed the shape of a room you'd known for years.

Vorak stirred once.

'Stop thinking and work,' he said.

I pulled the stack of correspondence toward me.

The first was from Caden. A formal note, short and direct, the way Caden communicated everything. Word had reached him that the bond was complete. At the bottom in his own hand rather than a secretary's, a single line. Ironfield stands where it stood. That hasn't changed.

I set it aside.

The second was from Cedric. Longer than Caden's, which was typical. Cedric liked to say things completely. Congratulations on the completed bond. A note that Coldmere's position remained unchanged. And at the end, a single observation that stayed with me longer than the rest. The High Council of the Eastern Territories is coming to evaluate something that has already been decided. Make sure they understand that before they sit down.

I wrote a response to both and sealed them and set them with Pryor's outgoing correspondence.

The third letter was from the High Council's office. Formal confirmation of their arrival date. Less than two weeks now. Seven wolves traveling to Wraithbone to examine something that had already been settled before they left their own territory.

I wasn't concerned about the visit.

That was different from how I would have felt even two weeks ago. Two weeks ago the mark and the mating hadn't happened yet, and Isla was still finding her footing in a world that had spent her entire life telling her she didn't belong in it. Back then, the high council's visit has been a significant pressure point.

Now it was an administrative matter.

They would come. They would see what was here. They would ask their questions and Isla would answer them the way she answered everything, directly and without apology, and they would leave with whatever they came to confirm confirmed.

Halvon would push. He always pushed. But he'd be pushing against something that couldn't be moved now, a completed bond, a mated pair, a Celestial wolf who had already stood in front of Caden and Cedr and handled both of them without preparation.

Let him push.

I set the High Council letter in the file Pryor kept for their correspondence and picked up the next thing on the stack.

The next repert

25 Pets:

Border reports. Routine. Nothing flagged, nothing that required immediate attention. I read through them and made notes and set them aside.

Pack business. A dispute between two wolves in the eastern quarters that Zeron had already handled but thought I should know about.”

A request from the kitchen for supplies. A training schedule adjustment Raith wanted approved.

I worked through the stack methodically the way I worked through everything, one thing at a time, each one receiving the attention it needed and not more than that.

An hour passed.

Pryor came back in.

“The terms have been sent,” he said.

“How long for a response?” I asked.

“Depending on how quickly the settlement messenger moves, two days at the outside,” he said. “Possibly sooner.”

I nodded. “When it comes, bring it to me directly.”

“Of course,” he said.

He moved to his own desk and we worked in the quiet the way we’d worked together for years, each of us in our own lane.

At some point I looked up and realized I hadn’t thought about the cabin or Isla or Brent or the High Council for the better part of an hour.

I’d just worked.

That felt right.

Some mornings the weight of everything sat on the desk alongside the correspondence. This morning it didn’t. This morning the desk was just a desk and the work was just work and somewhere in the pack house Isla was probably doing whatever she did on a morning when nothing required her yet.

1 picked up the next report.

Comments,

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 187

That’s it then

(Isla)

The response came the following afternoon.

Caius found me in the library and handed me the document without saying anything first. I took it and re it with him beside me.

Brent had accepted.

Every condition. No objections noted, no requests for amendments, no pushback on any of the restrictions. Just a signature at the bottom of the page in handwriting I recognized from years of watch him sign his name to things in Ashcrest when he thought no one was paying attention.

I read it twice.

Then I folded it and handed it back to Caius.

“That’s it then,” I said.

“That’s it,” he said.

I sat down in the nearest chair and looked out the window. Wolves crossed the grounds in both direction each of them busy with whatever the day had brought. Nothing had changed out there. Nothing looked different.

Something felt different in me though. Not dramatically. Not the relief I’d half expected or the complicate tangle of feelings I’d been bracing for. Just a settling. The feeling of something that had been unresolved for a very long time finally having an answer attached to it.

Not the answer that undid anything.

Just an answer.

Vaela stirred inside me, quiet and present.

‘Done,’ she said.

‘Yes, I said. ‘Done‘

Caius sat across from me and said nothing. He did that well, the not filling silences. I’d appreciated it from the beginning and I appreciated it now.

After a while I looked at him.

“I thought I’d feel more,” I said.

“What did you expect to feel?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Something bigger. It feels like it should be bigger.

“It is big,” he said. “It just doesn’t always arrive that way.”

thought about that.

He was right. The biggest things rarely arrived the way you imagined they would. The mate bond hadn’t arrived the way I’d imagined. The shift hadn’t. The mark hadn’t. They’d all been significant in ways that didn’t look like significance from the outside, quiet and internal and impossible to fully explain to anyon who hadn’t been inside them.

This was the same.

Brent had accepted the terms. He would report regularly. He would stay within the settlement and its immediate area. He would carry the record permanently. He would have no contact with Rodan or Mare or any of the others.

And I would carry what had happened between us for the rest of my life, not as a wound that needed tending, not as something that defined me, just as part of the whole of what I’d lived and survived and come through.

That was what it was.

I looked at Caius.

“Dara,” I said. “She’ll have received her censure by now.”

“Yes,” he said. “Pryor confirmed it was delivered.”

“Did she respond?”

“She acknowledged receipt,” he said. “Nothing beyond that.”

I nodded.

I thought about Dara in the healer's house, the way she'd stood there and faced us without running, the way she'd answered every question without deflecting. She'd known what was coming and she'd accepte it the way she'd accepted everything, directly and without trying to manage it into something easier.

I hoped the healer let her stay.

"Can we find out?" I asked.

Caius looked at me. "About what?"

"Whether the healer kept her on," I said. "After the censure was delivered. Whether she's still there."

He looked at me for a moment. "You want to know she's alright."

"I want to know she has something," I said. "She gave up everything. I want to know she landed somewhere."

He nodded once. "I'll ask Pryor to find out."

I looked back at the window.

The afternoon was still moving along. Still ordinary. Still entirely unaware that something had just closed inside me that had been open for as long as I could remember thought about the shack.

Not with the weight it used to carry when it arrived in my thoughts. Just as a place. A real place that existed and had contained real things that had happened to a real person. That person was me. Those things had happened. The marks were still there. They always would be.

But the shack wasn't the last thing anymore.

It was one thing in a longer story that had kept going past it and kept going still.

Vaela was warm inside me.

'Yes, she said, as if she'd heard the thought.

'Yes, I said back.

I stood up.

Caius looked at me.

“I’m fine,” I said before he could ask. “I just want to move.”

He stood with me without making it a thing.

We left the library and walked without a destination, through the corridors of the pack house, past wolves who acknowledged us and moved on, through the entrance hall and out the front door and down the step into the afternoon.

I stopped at the bottom of the steps and looked out across the grounds.

The territory welcomed me the way it always did now, not with the curious attention of the first days, but with the settled recognition of something that knew exactly what I was and had decided long ago that I belonged here.

I stood in it and let it come.

“Less than two weeks,” I said.

Caius was beside me. “Yes.”

“The High Council.”

“Yes.”

I looked at the tree line. “Are you worried?”

“No,” he said.

“Neither am I,” I said.

That was true and it surprised me a little that it was true. Two weeks ago I would have been. The preparation sessions, Sorin’s name, Halvon’s reputation, the weight of seven wolves traveling to Wraithbone to decide something about me. At the time, all of it had carried a certain kind of pressure.

Now it didn’t.

That’s it ther

Not because nothing had changed politically. Everything Halvon wanted to challenge was still open to challenge. The old laws still had opponents. The questions about the Celestial wolf and what it meant for the balance of power between territories hadn’t gone anywhere.

But I had changed.

The bond was complete. The mark was done... Vaela was fully awake and fully mine. I had stood in front of Caden and read him before he finished his second sentence. I had stood in front of Cedric and answered the question that mattered to him honestly and watched him decide.

I wasn't the girl from the shack anymore.

I hadn't been for a while.

But standing here on the steps of Wraithbone's pack house, with Caius beside me and Brent's accepted terms sitting on the desk in the library, I understood it in a way I hadn't quite understood it before.

Not as something I told myself.

As something that was simply true.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 188

Simply true

(Isla)

A few minutes later I heard footsteps behind us.

"Pardon the interruption," Pryor said.

Caius and I turned.

"I've just heard from the healer," he said. "Dara has been allowed to remain in her position. The censu has been placed on her record, but she'll continue working there."

I let out a slow breath.

"I'm glad," I said.

Pryor nodded once.

"I thought you'd want to know."

“I did.”

He inclined his head to both of us before walking away.

I looked at Caius.

“She has a chance now.”

“Yes,” he said.

“I hope she makes the most of it.”

I watched Pryor disappear back into the pack house before looking across the grounds again.

Had I done the right thing?

The question came quietly, without accusation. Brent had accepted the terms. Dara had accepted the censure. Neither outcome had been easy for either of them, but neither had been cruel, either.

I thought about everything that had led us here.

I hadn’t chosen revenge. I’d chosen consequences. There was a difference, even if it hadn’t always felt clear while I was making the decision.

I couldn’t say whether everyone would agree with the choices I’d made.

Some would probably think Brent had been given too much. Others might believe Dara deserved to lose everything she’d built. I understood both arguments, but neither of them sat right with me.

Justice had never meant making someone suffer simply because they’d caused suffering.

It meant drawing a line and refusing to let it be crossed again.

Simply true

Hooked at Caius beside me.

He hadn’t tried to influence my decisions. He’d trusted me to make them myself.

Standing here now, realized I was grateful for that trust almost as much as I was for the choices it had allowed me to make.

I let that thought settle.

This wasn’t about whether everyone agreed with me. It wasn’t even about whether Brent or Dara agreed with me. The only question that mattered was whether I could live with the choices I’d made.

I could.

That didn’t mean they had been easy. It didn’t mean they hadn’t hurt.

It just meant I hadn’t betrayed the person I wanted to become in order to make them.

“You’ve gone quiet again,” Caius said.

I looked up at him.

“I know.”

“What are you thinking about?”

I took a moment before answering.

“Whether I’ll ever stop questioning my decisions.”

He held my gaze.

“The people who never question them are usually the ones who should.”

I thought about that.

“So it doesn’t ever go away?”

“It becomes quieter,” he said. “You learn the difference between doubting yourself and making sure you’ve done the right thing.”

I let his words settle.

They didn’t erase every question I had.

They didn’t need to.

They were enough to remind me that caring about the choices I’d made wasn’t a weakness. It was part of making them honestly.

I reached for his hand without thinking.

He took mine the same way he always did, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“I don’t want to become someone who stops caring,” I said.

Simply true

“You won’t.”

“You sound very certain.”

“I am.”

“How can you be?”

He smiled.

“Because I’ve watched the way you make every decision. You listen. You think. You care about who it affects. People like that don’t wake up one morning and stop caring.”

I looked at him for a long moment.

Somehow, hearing him believe it made it a little easier to believe it myself.

I smiled, though it was a small one.

“I hope you’re right.”

“I am.”

There wasn’t any hesitation in his voice. He believed every word as completely as he believed the sky would still be above us tomorrow. I wondered what it was like to have that kind of certainty about another person.

Maybe that was one of the quiet gifts of being loved by someone like Caius.

He saw the parts of me I still questioned and believed in them anyway.

I squeezed his hand once.

We stood together without saying anything else, letting the silence settle around us until it felt like an answer all on its own.

I took one last look across the grounds before drawing a slow breath.

Nothing had changed around me.

The same paths. The same buildings. The same woives going about their day.

The change had happened somewhere I couldn’t see.

It had happened inside me.

I hadn’t noticed it all at once. It had come one conversation, one choice, one act of kindness at a time until I could no longer remember what it felt like to believe I didn’t belong here.

I belonged.

That simple truth felt bigger than anything else.

I turned my head and looked at Caius.

He was watching the grounds now, one hand still holding mine as though he had no intention of letting go.

Simply true

Ismiled.

He noticed and looked back at me.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

His eyebrow lifted

“It doesn’t sound like nothing.”

I shook my head.

“I was just thinking how strange life is.”

“Strange?”

“I spent years believing I’d never belong anywhere.”

I looked around us once more.

“And now I can’t imagine belonging anywhere else.”

His fingers tightened around mine.

“I can’t either,” he said.

I felt my eyes sting for just a moment.

Not with sadness.

With gratitude.

Life had taken so much from me before it finally brought me here. If someone had told the girl in the shack that one day she'd stand beside her mate, surrounded by people who accepted her without question, she never would've believed it.

I believed it now.

Not because someone had promised it.

Because I was living it.

I rested my head lightly against his shoulder.

Neither of us spoke.

We didn't need to.

The answers I'd been searching for hadn't come all at once. They'd arrived quietly, one choice after another, until I found myself standing in a life that no longer felt borrowed.

Vaela settled contentedly inside me.

'Home,' she said.

Simply true

I–smiled.

Yes.

Not because Wraithbone was where I lived.

Because it was where I'd been allowed to become myself.

Caius squeezed my hand once, and together we turned toward the pack house, ready to meet whatever tomorrow chose to bring.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 189

The first lesson

(Caius)

I didn’t interrupt her thoughts.

She’d spent so much of her life without the space to have them that I wasn’t about to fill every silence now.

She walked beside me with her head a little higher than she once had.

Most wolves wouldn’t have noticed.

I did.

I’d watched fear slowly become confidence, one day at a time.

It hadn’t happened because I’d rescued her.

It had happened because she’d chosen, over and over again, to keep moving forward despite everything that had been done to her.

I couldn’t have been more proud of her if I’d tried.

I thought about the woman she’d become.

Not different from the one I’d found in Ashcrest.

Just free to be herself.

There was an important difference between those things.

Ashcrest hadn’t created her strength. It had only tried to bury it. Wraithbone hadn’t given it to her either. We’d simply given her the chance to uncover what had always been there.

She’d done the rest herself.

I’d never forget that.

Vorak stirred quietly.

‘She doesn’t see herself the way we do yet.”

‘Not completely.

‘She will.‘

I believed that.

Every day she grew a little more certain of herself, a little less willing to carry the lies Ashcrest had forced on her. It wasn’t happening quickly, and I was glad for that. The strongest changes were usually the quiet ones.

They lasted.

The first lesson

Just like this one would.

She was quiet for another minute before looking over at me.

“I’ve been thinking about something.”

“What?”

She took a slow breath.

“I think it’s time.”

“For what?”

“To learn.”

I waited.

“I can’t have this much power and keep pretending I don’t need to understand it,” she said. “I’m a Celesti wolf, Caius. I’ve seen some of what Vaela can do, but I don’t understand what any of it means yet. I don’t know what’s possible or what I’m supposed to become.”

I looked at her for a moment.

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

She smiled.

“You were?”

“Yes,” I said. “And I know exactly where we’ll begin.”

She was quiet for a moment before speaking again.

“I know what Vaela can do.”

I looked at her.

“I know I can read intentions. I know I can feel things other wolves don’t. I know there are abilities I haven really explored yet.”

She drew a slow breath.

“I’ve been so focused on everything else that I haven’t really explored any of it.”

“You’ve had other priorities,” I said.

“I know.”

She looked at me.

“But I don’t want to ignore this anymore.”

“You won’t,” I said. “We’ll learn together.”

She smiled, but there was determination behind it now.

The first lesson

“Where do we start?”

“With control,” I said.

She frowned slightly

“I thought you’d say power.”

I shook my head.

“Power without control has never helped anyone. You already have the power. What you need now is to understand it.”

She thought about that for a moment.

“And after that?”

“We’ll discover what your abilities can really do. One step at a time.”

She nodded.

“I think I’m ready for that.”

“So do I,” I said.

I looked toward the training grounds.

“We won’t be rushing any of it,” I said. “The strongest abilities aren’t the ones used the fastest. They’re the ones understood the best.”

She followed my gaze.

“So this won’t be like ordinary training.”

“No.”

“What will it be like?”

I smiled.

“We’ll start with the things your senses are already trying to tell you. Then we’ll learn how to separate instinct from ability. Once you can do that, everything else becomes easier,”

She nodded slowly.

“I’ve spent enough time guessing.”

“You won’t have to anymore.”

She looked toward the forest beyond the training grounds.

“Has anyone ever trained a Celestial wolf before?”

“Not in our lifetime.”

She looked back at me.

The first lesson

“So we’re figuring it out as we go.”

“Some of it.”

She was quiet for a moment.

“Does that worry you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because the most important part isn’t finding someone who has all the answers.” I smiled. “It’s making sure you never have to look for them alone.”

She held my gaze for a second before nodding.

“I think I can do that.”

“I know you can.”

I looked at her for a moment.

“You know,” I said, “there’s one advantage we have.”

“What?”

“No one knows exactly what a Celestial wolf can become.”

She smiled.

“I thought that was supposed to be the difficult party

“It is.”

“Then why is it an advantage?”

“Because it means no one gets to decide your limits before you do.”

She was quiet for a second.

“I like that.”

“So do I.”

I offered her my hand.

She took it without hesitation.

“So,” I said, “tomorrow morning.”

She smiled.

“Tomorrow morning.”

There was excitement in her voice now.

Not because she expected easy answers.

Because she was finally ready to ask the questions.

I found myself thinking ahead.

Not to the High Council.

Not to politics or the decisions waiting on my desk.

To mornings on the training grounds. Questions only Isla would think to ask. Discoveries neither of us expected. Mistakes we'd learn from together.

I wondered what we'd discover first.

Perhaps something recorded in old histories.

Perhaps something no one had ever seen before.

Either way, we'd approach it the same way we'd approached everything else since Ashcrest.

One step at a time.

There was no value in rushing understanding.

Some things revealed themselves only when they were given the time they deserved.

I had a feeling Isla would learn that quickly.

She'd already become very good at trusting the journey instead of demanding every answer at once.

The old records had called the Celestial wolf rare.

They'd written about abilities, responsibilities and history.

None of them had written about Isla.

They couldn't have.

She wasn't here to repeat someone else's story.

She was here to live her own.

Whatever we uncovered over the coming weeks would belong to her, not to the wolves who had come before.

That was how history continued.

Not by repeating itself.

By giving the next generation something new to remember.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 190

The first record

(Isla)

I hadn’t expected our first lesson to begin with books.

When Caius asked me to meet him after breakfast the next morning, I’d imagined the training ground the forest beyond them.

Instead, he led me through the oldest corridor in the pack house until we stopped outside a pair of he wooden doors.

He pushed one open.

Shelves stretched from floor to ceiling.

I stared for a moment.

“All of these belong to Wraithbone?”

He smiled.

“They do.”

“And somewhere in here is information about Celestial wolves?”

“I hope so.”

He stepped inside and I followed.

The room felt quieter than anywhere else in the pack house. Sunlight came through the tall windows an fell across rows of shelves that seemed to go on forever. Some of the books looked newer, but others were so worn I wondered how many generations of wolves had held them before me.

I turned slowly, taking it all in.

“I didn’t know Wraithbone had a place like this,” I said.

“Most wolves never have a reason to come here,” Caius replied.

“Then I suppose I’m about to become one of the few who do.”

Caius walked toward one of the shelves without any hesitation.

It made me wonder how many hours he’d spent in this room over the years. He reached for a thick book. and set it carefully on a nearby table before looking back at me.

“This library holds the history of Wraithbone,” he said. “Some of it goes back hundreds of years.”

I rested my hand lightly on the cover.

“And somewhere in all of this,” I said, “we’re hoping someone wrote about a Celestial wolf.”

“We’re hoping,” he said. “But we’re also prepared for the possibility that they didn’t.”

Iran my fingers lightly across the edge of the table.

“What if the answers aren’t here?”

Caius looked at me

“Then we’ll keep looking.”

“And if no one ever wrote them down?”

“Then we’ll discover them ourselves.”

I held his gaze for a moment.

“You make that sound simple.”

“It won’t be simple.”

He smiled.

“But impossible and unknown aren’t the same thing.”

His words stayed with me.

I’d spent years believing that if something had no answer, it wasn’t worth asking about. Ashcrest had taught me that questions were dangerous. Wraithbone had slowly taught me the opposite.

I looked down at the book beneath my hand.

“So where do we start?”

Caius opened it carefully.

“At the oldest record we have.”

I looked at the old pages.

“And if it doesn’t mention Celestial wolves?”

He turned the first page.

“Then we move to the next one.”

For some reason, that answer made me smile.

I leaned over the table.

The pages were filled with careful handwriting worn by time.

“Who wrote this?

“The Alpha who ruled Wraithbone almost three hundred years ago.”

I looked up.

“He kept all of this himself?”

The first recent

“He believed history was too important to leave to memory.”

I nodded slowly.

“I think I understand that.

“So do I.”

He turned another page.

“Let’s see what he thought was worth remembering.”

He stopped a few pages later.

His finger rested beside a short paragraph near the bottom of the page.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The first mention of a wolf unlike the others.”

I stepped closer.

“It doesn’t say Celestial.”

“No,” Caius said. “That name came later.”

I looked at the passage again.

“So we’re looking for descriptions, not titles.”

“Exactly.”

I smiled.

Somehow that made the search feel more real.

We weren’t looking for one sentence hidden in a book.

We were piecing together a story that had been scattered across generations.

Caius began reading the passage aloud.

It described a wolf whose presence unsettled even the strongest Alphas, Not through fear or strength, but through something they couldn’t explain. The words were careful, as though the writer hadn’t fully understood what he’d witnessed.

“That’s all?” I asked.

“For this entry.”

I frowned.

“It raises more questions than it answers.”

Caius nodded.

The first record

Old records often do.”

I read the passage again for myself.

It was only a few lines

After everything we’d just talked about, I’d expected something bigger. A detailed account. A list of abilities. Anything that explained what being a Celestial wolf actually meant.

Instead, there were only fragments.

“How many entries like this are there?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Caius admitted.

“You don’t?”

He shook his head.

“No one has ever had a reason to gather them before.”

I thought about what he’d just said before looking back at the book.

“It feels strange.”

“What does?”

“Knowing that someone might have seen another Celestial wolf centuries ago, yet only wrote a few lines about it.”

Caius looked at the page.

“They recorded what they understood.”

“And ignored what they didn’t?”

“Sometimes.”

I looked at the passage again.

“Then maybe we’re looking for things they never realized were important.”

“I think we are.”

I let out a quiet breath.

“I think I expected the past to be clearer.”

“It rarely is.”

“You say that like you’ve learned it before.”

“I have.”

He turned another page.

The first record

The truth usually hides between small details. That’s why reading everything matters.”

Hlooked around the room.

It finally made sense why he’d brought me here before the training grounds.

Before I learned to use my abilities, I needed to learn the story they belonged to.

I stood quietly for a moment.

This wasn’t going to be one morning of reading followed by easy answers.

It was going to take patience.

More questions than certainty.

More searching than finding.

Strangely, that didn’t discourage me.

It made me want to keep going.

I reached for the edge of the book.

“So what happens now?”

Caius looked at me.

“Now we read.”

I smiled.

“Just read?”

“For today.”

He turned another page.

“We’re not trying to solve everything before lunch. We’re trying to understand what the wolves before us thought was worth recording.”

I nodded.

That felt like the right place to begin.

Not with my abilities, but with the wolves who had come before me, leaving behind pieces of a story they hadn’t known someone would one day need to finish.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 191

Pieces of the past

Pieces of the past

(Caius)

I watched Isla study the page in front of her.

She read it twice before looking at the notes she’d started making beside the book. She wasn’t searching for quick answers anymore. She was already looking for connections.

A small smile came to my face.

Most wolves would’ve stopped after finding the first mention of someone unusual. Isla wanted to know whether that same story had appeared somewhere else. I reached for another record from the stack beside me, wondering if history had left us more than one piece to find.

Before I opened it, I glanced at the notes she'd written.

She hadn't copied the passage word for word. She'd written only the details she thought mattered. Reading intentions. Truth. A wolf unlike the others. It was exactly how I'd hoped she'd approach this.

I pulled the second record closer.

"This one was written almost ninety years after the first," I said.

Isla looked up.

"So whoever wrote it never read the first account."

"They couldn't have."

I opened the book and found the page I'd marked earlier.

"It was written by a different Alpha," I said. "Different generation. Different circumstances."

I turned the book so she could read with me.

The account described a gathering between several territories after a dispute along the northern border. Most of the entry focused on the disagreement itself, but one paragraph stood apart from the rest.

I read it aloud.

"Among those who traveled with the eastern delegation was a woman unlike the others. Before any Alpha spoke, she answered the concern each of them had come to hide. By the time the meeting ended, there were no secrets left worth keeping."

I looked at Isla.

"What does that sound like to you?"

She didn't answer immediately.

She read the paragraph again before looking at the notes she'd already made.

"The first record."

Inodded:

"They're not identical."

“No.”

“But they’re describing the same ability.”

“That’s what I think.”

She reached for her paper and wrote another line beneath the first.

Reading intentions.

Appears in more than one account.

I watched her for a moment.

She wasn’t trying to force the records to fit together. She was letting them speak for themselves.

That mattered.

We moved to the next book.

This one had been written almost a century later.

The handwriting was different again. So was the Alpha who’d recorded it.

I skimmed the page until I found the passage I’d remembered.

Csics

“The white wolf entered the clearing, and every conversation ended before she asked for silence. No command was given. None was needed. Every wolf present understood they stood before something they could not explain.”

Isla looked at me.

“The territory.”

“Maybe.”

“Or the wolves themselves.”

“Possibly.”

She looked back at the page.

“They didn’t sound afraid.”

“No.”

“They sounded… aware.”

I smiled.

“I think that’s a better word,”

Pieces of the past

She wrote another note.

Presence changes the room.

No command needed

The pile of notes was beginning to grow.

So was the pattern.

I reached for another record.

“This one wasn’t written by an Alpha.”

She looked surprised.

“Who wrote it?”

“A healer.”

I opened it carefully.

The entry described a woman who’d visited during an illness that had spread through several neighboring packs. The healer admitted she couldn’t explain how the stranger always knew which patients needed help first.

“She looked at each wolf only once,” I read, “yet she never chose the wrong one.”

Isla leaned closer.

“She could sense it.”

“That’s what I believe.”

“The healer didn’t understand how.”

“No.”

“But she wrote it down anyway.”

I nodded once.

“Sometimes people preserve the truth even when they don’t understand it.”

That thought stayed between us for a moment.

The records weren’t giving us explanations.

They were giving us observations.

Small pieces left behind by wolves who’d witnessed something extraordinary without realizing what they were seeing.

I looked across the books spread over the table.

Different centuries.

Pieces of the mast

Different writers.

Different circumstances.

Yet the same details continued to appear:

Truth.

Awareness.

A presence that changed those around her.

An understanding beyond ordinary wolves.

I rested one hand on the nearest book.

“I don’t think these accounts are accidents,” I said quietly.

Isla looked at the pages before us.

“I don’t either.”

Neither of us spoke for a moment.

The silence wasn’t empty.

It was filled with the realization that we’d stopped searching for a single mention of a Celestial wolf.

Clayn

Instead, we were beginning to uncover a history that had been scattered across generations, waiting for someone to recognize that the stories belonged together.

I looked back at the notes Isla had gathered.

There weren’t many.

Just a handful of words repeated often enough to matter. Intentions. Truth. Presence. Awareness. None of the writers had known they were describing the same kind of wolf, yet they’d all noticed the same things.

“Keep writing them down,” I said.

She looked at me.

“Even if they seem small?”

“Especially then.”

She nodded once and added another line beneath the others.

Patterns matter more than single stories.

I watched her write it.

Most wolves searched old records hoping to find one answer that explained everything. They wanted certainty. History rarely offered that. More often, it offered fragments that only made sense when enough of them were placed side by side.

Pieces of the task

I reached for another book but didn’t open it yet.

“There are still dozens of records we haven’t looked through,” I said.

“And some of them won’t mention anything useful.”

“Probably.”

She smiled faintly.

“I don’t mind.”

“No?”

She shook her head.

“If we have to read fifty books to find one page that matters, then that’s what we’ll do.”

I found myself smiling back.

Not long ago she would’ve been worried about wasting time.

Now she understood that understanding took patience.

That mattered more than any ability she might one day master.

I looked around the library.

Clerm

These shelves had stood here longer than I had been alive. Generations of Alphas had added to them without knowing what they were preserving. None of them had expected the records to become part of a search like this.

Yet here we were.

Not changing history.

Simply reading it differently.

I had a feeling this library held far more than either of us realized.

The challenge wasn’t finding the books.

It was learning how to ask the right questions before we opened them.

I looked at Isla again.

She was already reaching for the next record.

Without a word, I slid it across the table to her.

The search had only just begun.

Pieces of the past

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 192

Patterns acres time

Clerm

Patterns across time

(Isla)

I took the next book from Caius and rested it beside the others.

It looked no different from the rest.

The cover was worn, the corners softened by years of careful hands. The pages looked just as old as every record we'd opened that morning. Yet I found myself wondering what piece of the story it had been holding all this time.

I'd come here expecting to learn about my abilities.

Instead, I was learning about the wolves who had carried them before me.

Somehow, that felt even more important.

I opened the book carefully.

The handwriting was different again.

Another writer. Another generation. Another wolf who'd seen something they couldn't fully explain. I found myself wondering how many of them had walked away believing they'd witnessed a single strange moment, never realizing it was part of a much bigger story.

I looked at Caius.

"They all noticed something," I said.

"They did."

"But none of them knew what they were looking at."

“No.”

I looked back at the page.

“Maybe we’re the first ones trying to read all of it together.”

I lowered my eyes to the page again.

It made me wonder how many stories had been overlooked simply because no one knew they belonged together. Each writer had recorded only the moment in front of them. None of them had lived long enough to see the pattern stretching across generations.

The thought settled quietly inside me.

Maybe that was how history worked more often than people realized. It wasn’t always one complete story waiting to be found. Sometimes it was hundreds of small pieces, waiting patiently for someone willing to fit them together.

I turned the page slowly.

Patterns acress-time

Chains

There was no mention of a Celestial wolf. No remarkable title or obvious clue waiting for me. Just another account written by someone who’d believed they were recording an ordinary day.

I found myself reading more carefully because of that.

The biggest answers might not be hiding in dramatic moments. They might be waiting in ordinary details that everyone else had overlooked After everything we’d found already, I wasn’t willing to dismiss anything too quickly.

I pointed to a short paragraph near the bottom of the page

“This doesn’t seem important.”

Caius stepped beside me.

“What does it say?”

“It mentions a woman visiting for only one evening, but the writer spends three lines describing how everyone kept watching her.”

He read it silently.

“They noticed her.”

“But they didn’t know why.”

“No.”

I smiled faintly.

“It feels like that’s becoming a pattern too.”

“I think you’re right.”

I looked at the paragraph again.

“It never says what she did.”

Caius nodded.

“Only what everyone else did.”

I read it one more time.

“They stopped talking when she entered. They watched her until she left. Then the writer moved on to something else.”

I looked up.

“As though that part wasn’t important.”

“To them, it probably wasn’t.”

“But it is to us.”

“Yes.”

Patterns across time picked up my pencil and wrote another note.

People noticed her before they understood her.

I looked down at the list I’d started.

It wasn’t very long.

Just a handful of observations gathered from different centuries. Yet every new note made the ones above it feel stronger somehow. Alone, they were interesting. Together, they were beginning to tell a story.

I rested the pencil against the page.

Maybe that was how truth survived.

Not because someone understood all of it at once, but because enough people noticed small pieces and cared enough to write them down.

Caius was quiet for a moment before reaching toward another stack.

“History isn’t the only thing stored here,” he said.

I looked up.

“What do you mean?”

He pulled out a thinner book bound in dark leather.

“Some Alphas kept training journals alongside the records. Most are ordinary.”

He rested his hand on the cover.

“But I found one that mentions symbols used to focus a wolf’s senses. I don’t know if they’ll help a Celestial wolf.”

I felt my curiosity grow.

“Then I think we should find out.”

He opened the journal carefully.

The first few pages were filled with sketches instead of writing. Circles. Lines. Marks arranged in patterns didn’t recognize. They looked simple at first, but the longer I studied them, the more deliberate they seemed.

“What are they?” I asked.

“I’m not certain.”

He traced one symbol with his finger.

“The notes beside them describe exercises for focus and awareness. They weren’t created for a Celestial wolf, but they may help us understand how earlier wolves trained their minds before relying on instinct,”

I leaned closer to the page.

Patterns acress time

The symbols had been drawn with purpose.

Claen

Some repeated throughout the journal, while others appeared only once beside different notes. Whoever had created them had been trying to teach something, not simply record it.

I looked at Caius.

“Do you think they still work?”

“I think they worked for the wolves who created them.”

“And for me?”

He smiled faintly.

“That’s what we’re going to discover.”

A quiet sense of anticipation settled inside me.

It felt as though we’d stopped searching only for answers.

We were beginning to find a place to start.

I looked back at the journal.

The more I studied the symbols, the less they felt like drawings on a page. They felt like the beginning of a conversation between wolves separated by generations. Someone had taken the time to leave these behind, hoping another wolf would one day understand them.

I rested my hand.lightly on the edge of the book.

Maybe that wolf had never imagined it would be me.

Maybe they hadn’t imagined a Celestial wolf at all.

Even so, their work had survived long enough to find its way into my hands.

I closed the journal carefully.

“We’re not trying these today, are we?” I asked.

Caius shook his head.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because understanding comes before practice. I’d rather you know why you’re doing something than simply copy the movements.”

I nodded.

That answer didn’t disappoint me.

If anything, it made me trust the process even more.

Patterns acress time

Tomorrow we would leave the library

Tomorrow the symbols would become more than drawings on a page.

Today, they were still teaching us to ask the right questions.

Cate

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 193

The path before-us-

The path before us

(Caius)

I watched Isla close the journal with more care than she’d opened it.

She wasn’t disappointed that we weren’t training today. If anything, she seemed more eager than when we’d first walked into the library this morning. That told me we’d made the right choice.

Most wolves wanted answers they could use immediately.

Isla wanted to understand why those answers existed in the first place:

There was a difference.

One created power.

The other created wisdom.

If she continued approaching every lesson that way, the abilities she'd one day master would rest on something far stronger than instinct.

I gathered the journals into a single stack.

"We've done enough for today," I said.

Isla looked up from her notes.

"You think so?"

I nodded.

"I'd rather you leave with a few ideas you understand than a hundred pages you barely remember."

She smiled.

"I was hoping you'd say we could stay until dinner."

I laughed quietly.

"We'll be back."

"There are still so many books."

"And we're not finished with them."

She carefully gathered her notes before slipping them between the pages of her notebook.

"You really think these symbols are worth trying?" she asked.

"I do."

"Even though they weren't written for a Celestial wolf?"

"Especially because they weren't."

The path before us She frowned slightly.

“I don’t understand.”

“No one has ever recorded how to train a Celestial wolf,” I said. “So we begin with what history has already given us, then we learn where your path becomes different.”

She fell quiet.

I recognized the look on her face.

She wasn’t thinking anymore.

She was listening.

‘Vaela?’

‘I’m here.’

‘Have you seen those symbols before?’

‘Neyer.’

‘Do they mean anything to you?’

‘Not yet.’

Isla let out a quiet breath.

‘I thought you might already know.

‘So did I.’

There was a brief pause.

‘Perhaps this lesson isn’t only for you, Vaela said. ‘Perhaps it’s for both of us.'”

Isla remained quiet for another moment.

‘Do you feel anything when you look at them?’ she asked.

‘No, Vaela replied. ‘Not recognition. Only possibility. They don’t feel familiar, but they don’t feel wrong either.’

Isla looked back at the journal.

“I think that’s enough for me,” she said.

“It is for me too.”

She slipped the notebook under her arm and looked at me.

“So tomorrow we stop reading?”

I shook my head.

The path belere us

“No.”

She blinked.

“We’ll still read. We’ll simply spend part of the morning putting these symbols into practice.”

Her smile returned.

“So the lessons begin.”

“They already have.”

I picked up the training journal.

“Tomorrow we’ll discover whether these pages hold more than history.”

I glanced at the symbols one last time before closing the journal.

“We won’t know if these work until we try them.”

“No.”

“But I have a feeling they weren’t preserved by accident.”

She looked thoughtful.

“You think someone wanted them to survive.”

“I do.”

“And now they’ve reached us.”

I nodded once.

“Now it’s our turn to learn from them.”

She was already moving toward the door when she stopped.

“Can I take one with me?” she asked, looking back at the journals.

“No,” I said.

She turned fully.

“Why not?”

“Because you’ll read all night and come back tomorrow too tired to practice anything.”

She opened her mouth.

Then closed it.

“That’s fair,” she said.

She walked out without arguing, and I smiled at that.

Clath

The path before us pulled the library door closed behind me and caught up with her in the hall.

She was already thinking about tomorrow. I could see it in the way she walked, that focused quiet she had when something had taken hold of her attention and wasn’t letting go.

Good.

She’d need that.

I glanced at Isla as we walked.

She hadn’t looked back at the library once. She didn’t need to. She knew we’d return, and that certainty was enough.

I had spent years believing the library existed to preserve the past.

Today, I realized it could do something more.

It could shape the future.

Not by giving us every answer.

But by giving us the right place to begin.

By the time we reached our quarters, I no longer felt the urgency I'd carried into the library that morning.

We hadn't solved the mystery.

We hadn't uncovered every answer.

But we'd found a place to begin, and sometimes that was the hardest part.

Everything else would come one lesson at a time.

One question at a time.

One discovery at a time.

I closed the door behind us when we reached our quarters and set the journal aside.

For the rest of the day, it could remain exactly where it was.

Some lessons needed time to settle before another one began. I wasn't interested in seeing how much Isla could absorb in a single day.

I was interested in making sure every lesson stayed with her long after it ended.

I glanced toward the window.

The training grounds waited beyond the trees, exactly where they'd been all morning

We hadn't reached them today.

Strangely, I didn't feel we'd lost anything because of it.

When we stepped onto them tomorrow, we'd do so with a clearer understanding of why we were there.

The path before us

That mattered more than beginning a day sooner.

The room settled into a comfortable silence.

Neither of us felt the need to fill it.

There was a quiet satisfaction in knowing we'd used the day well. Not every lesson had to end with a breakthrough. Sometimes leaving with a better understanding than you'd arrived with was enough.

Today had been one of those days.

I leaned back in my chair and let out a quiet breath.

The day hadn't unfolded the way I'd planned.

Looking back, I was grateful for that.

If we'd gone straight to the training grounds, we would've missed everything the library had quietly placed in front of us.

Sometimes the best lessons weren't the ones you planned.

They were the ones you found because you were willing to look.

Some journeys didn't begin with action. They began with understanding, and I believed that was exactly what today had given us.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 194

One lesson at time

One lesson at a time

(Isla)

I woke before sunrise.

The symbols were the first thing I thought about.

I'd gone to sleep expecting my mind to leave them behind until morning. Instead, they'd stayed with me, simple circles and lines that somehow felt more important now than they had in the library.

I lay still for a moment, looking at the ceiling.

Today wasn't about finding another old record or reading another forgotten account. Today we would find out whether those pages held something we could actually use. I didn't know what to expect, and for once, that didn't bother me.

I turned my head toward the window.

The first light of morning was beginning to reach the room. Everything outside was still quiet, as though Wraithbone itself hadn't fully woken yet. It felt like the right kind of morning to begin something new.

'You're excited,' Vaela observed.

'I am.'

'So am I.'

That made me smile.

Whatever happened today, neither of us would be facing it alone.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed.

For a moment I simply sat there, listening to the quiet around me. The day hadn't really begun yet, but it already felt different from the one before.

Yesterday had been about understanding.

Today would be about taking the first step.

I slipped quietly out of bed, careful not to disturb Caius.

I'd almost made it to my feet when I heard him behind me.

"You're awake early."

I turned and found him watching me with a small smile.

"So are you."

"I noticed you got up."

"I wasn't trying to wake you."

"You didn't."

He sat up and rested his back against the headboard.

“I had a feeling you’d be thinking about today.”

I smiled.

“You know me too well.”

“I’ve been paying attention.”

That made me laugh.

He crossed the room and stopped beside me.

“You look ready already,” he said.

“I think I finally am.”

He studied me for a moment before nodding.

“I believe you.”

His confidence settled something inside me.

If he thought I was ready to begin, maybe I was.

Neither of us spoke for a moment.

The silence felt familiar now. It wasn’t uncertain or awkward anymore. It was simply the quiet we shared before another day began.

Caius looked at me.

“Ready for breakfast?”

I smiled.

“I was wondering when you’d ask.”

He laughed.

“I know better than to start training on an empty stomach.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” I said.

He smiled and walked toward the door.

“I asked the kitchen to bring breakfast a little earlier today.”

“You planned ahead.”

“I usually do.”

I laughed.

“I’ve noticed.”

A knock sounded a moment later.

Caius glanced at me.

“Perfect timing.”

I followed him to the door, feeling the excitement I’d woken with return all over again.

The day was finally beginning.

Caius stepped aside to let the kitchen staff leave before closing the door again.

He carried the tray to the table while I followed behind him. The room filled with the familiar smell of breakfast, and I realized I’d been thinking so much about today that I’d almost forgotten I was hungry.

“Sit,” he said.

I raised an eyebrow.

“That sounded like an order.”

“It was.”

I smiled as I pulled out a chair.

“I suppose I can live with that one.”

I picked up my cup and took a sip before looking at Caius.

“You seem calm.”

“I am.”

“I would’ve thought you’d be just as curious as I am.”

“I am curious.”

“Then why don’t you look it?”

He smiled faintly.

“Because curiosity doesn’t disappear if you meet it calmly.”

I considered that for a moment before nodding.

“I have a feeling I’m going to learn more than symbols from you.”

“I hope so.”

Caius finished his tea and set the cup aside.

“We don’t need to stay long.”

I looked at him.

One lessonata time thought we’d spend the whole morning out there.”

“We might.”

He smiled.

“Or we might spend an hour on the first exercise.”

“Only one?”

“If it takes longer to understand, then that’s where we’ll stop.”

I smiled.

Yesterday had taught me patience.

Today, I had a feeling I’d be practicing it.

I finished the last of my breakfast and set my cup down.

Neither of us hurried to stand. It wasn’t because we were delaying the lesson. We were simply giving ourselves the time to begin the day properly.

Caius reached for the journal resting beside him.

“I only brought one.”

I looked at the worn leather cover.

“The first symbol?”

He nodded.

“There’s no reason to think about the others until we understand this one.”

“That makes sense.”

He stood and held the journal under one arm.

“I’d rather build one solid foundation than rush through ten exercises.”

I pushed my chair back and stood.

“I think I’m beginning to understand how you teach.”

He smiled.

“And what have you learned?”

“That you’re never in a hurry.”

“No.”

“Not even a little.”

“Some things can’t be rushed.”

I stepped closer until only a small space separated us.

“I don’t think I would’ve believed that a few months ago.”

“I know.”

“What changed?”

He met my eyes.

“You did.”

Before I could answer, I reached up and kissed him.

It wasn’t a long kiss. Just enough to make him smile when we pulled apart.

“I think that’s a good way to start the day,” I said.

“I was thinking the same thing.”

He leaned down and kissed my forehead before opening the door.

“Come on.”

I smiled.

“I’ve waited long enough.”

I matched my pace to his as we left our quarters.

It occurred to me that I wasn’t carrying anything with me except quiet confidence. Not fear. Not doubt. Just the feeling that I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

There had been a time when every new day felt uncertain.

Today felt different.

Today felt like the beginning of something I’d been searching for long before I knew what I was looking for.

Whatever waited for me on the training grounds, I was ready to meet it. Not because I already knew the answers, but because I no longer feared the questions.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 195

The art of seeing

(Isla)

The path to the training grounds had become familiar over the past few weeks.

I’d walked it more times than I could count. This morning, though, every step carried a different meaning. I wasn’t going there to watch others train or practice ordinary skills.

I was walking toward a lesson no Celestial wolf had ever recorded before.

That thought should’ve made me nervous.

Instead, it made me smile.

I looked over at Caius as we walked.

He hadn’t said much since we left our quarters. He didn’t seem to think the silence needed filling, and I was beginning to understand why. Some moments were better experienced than talked through.

I drew a slow breath.

Soon we’d stop walking.

Soon the first lesson would begin.

I wasn’t trying to imagine what would happen anymore.

There was no point guessing before we’d even begun. Whatever the first symbol had to teach me would reveal itself soon enough. Until then, I was content simply to walk beside Caius.

For now, I was exactly where I wanted to be.

A few moments later, Caius slowed to a stop.

I looked ahead and recognized the clearing we’d used before. It was quiet, empty, and far enough from the rest of the grounds that no one would disturb us. The stillness made it feel as though the morning belonged to us alone.

Caius looked around once before turning to me.

“This will do.”

I nodded.

I had a feeling this place would always mean something different after today.

Caius rested the journal on a flat stone near the edge of the clearing.

For a moment he didn’t open it. Instead, he looked around the training ground as though making sure nothing would distract us. Only when he seemed satisfied did he turn back to me.

“Before we begin,” he said, “I want you to forget everything you’re hoping will happen.”

The art of seetfig

Hooked at him.

“Everything?”

He nodded.

“If you’re waiting for something extraordinary, you might miss something important.”

I considered that for a moment.

“So today isn’t about looking for power.”

“No.”

“What is it about?”

He picked up the journal.

“Learning to observe.”

I frowned slightly.

“Observe what?”

He smiled.

“That’s for you to discover.”

I looked at the journal again.

Yesterday it had been filled with mystery.

Today it felt like an invitation.

I watched as Caius carefully opened it.

He didn’t speak straight away. He gave me time to study the symbol without telling me what I should think. At first I didn’t understand why.

Then I realized he wanted my first impression.

“What do you see?” he asked.

I studied the page.

“It looks… simple.”

“It does.”

“But I don’t think it is.”

A faint smile crossed his face.

“Neither do I.”

Something about that answer settled me.

We didn’t need certainty to begin.

We only needed an open mind.

I lowered my eyes to the page again.

The circle wasn’t perfectly round. The lines crossing through it weren’t evenly spaced either. At first I thought they might have been mistakes, but the longer I looked, the less I believed that.

“I think it was drawn this way on purpose,” I said,

“I think so too.”

“You don’t know why?”

“No.”

I looked at him.

“I thought you’d already worked that part out.”

He smiled.

“If I had, this lesson wouldn’t belong to both of us.”

That made me smile.

For some reason, I liked knowing he was discovering this with me instead of leading me toward conclusions he’d already reached.

Caius closed the journal for a moment and looked around the clearing.

“Books can only take us so far,” he said.

I followed his gaze.

“So this is where the real lesson starts.”

He nodded.

“I think so.”

He picked up a small stick from the ground and knelt.

Without hurrying, he copied the first symbol into the dirt exactly as it appeared in the journal. Every line was placed with care, and when he finished, he compared it to the page before setting the journal aside.

“Come here,” he said.

I stepped closer until I was standing beside him.

“Now,” he said, “tell me what changes.”

I lowered my eyes to the ground.

The symbol looked ordinary at first glance. If someone had walked past, they probably wouldn’t have given

The art of seemig it a second look. Yet standing over it felt strangely different.

“I’m still not sure what I’m supposed to see,” I admitted.

“You don’t have to be.”

I looked at him.

“Then how will I know?”

“You’ll realize you’re thinking differently than you were a few minutes ago.”

I thought about that.

He wasn’t trying to hand me an answer.

He was teaching me a different way to see.

This time I stopped wondering what the symbol could do.

I simply looked at it.

“The symbol hasn’t changed,” I said slowly. “I have.”

Caius met my eyes without speaking.

Cam

“When it was in the journal, it felt like history,” I continued. “Now it’s here in front of us. It feels… possible.”

A faint smile appeared on his face.

“Good.”

“Is that what you wanted?”

He shook his head.

“It’s what you found. That’s all I wanted.”

He stepped back from the symbol.

“Now we begin.”

I looked from him to the drawing.

“What do I do?”

“Stand inside the circle.”

I hesitated for only a moment before stepping forward.

The lines surrounded my feet, but nothing happened. No rush of power. No strange feeling. Only silence.

I looked back at Caius.

“I don’t feel anything.”

wasn’t expecting you to.”

I blinked.

“You weren’t?”

He smiled.

“Our first lesson isn’t about feeling.”

“It’s about paying attention.”

I stayed exactly where I was.

The silence no longer felt empty. It gave me room to see things I'd overlooked before. Maybe that was what Caius had been trying to teach me from the very beginning.

I closed my eyes again and let the quiet settle around me, trusting that the lesson had only just begun.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 196

The first symbol

The first symbol

(Isla)

I remained inside the circle without moving.

After a while, I forgot I was waiting for anything to happen. The quiet became easier to accept, and my thoughts became clearer than they'd been all morning.

"Caius," I said softly.

"Yes?"

"I think I understand."

His expression stayed calm.

"What do you understand?"

"I came here expecting the symbol to teach me something."

He nodded.

"But the first lesson wasn't in the symbol."

He smiled.

"No."

"It was in me."

For a moment neither of us spoke.

Then Caius reached for the journal and turned to the next page.

“That’s exactly where we needed to begin.”

Caius turned another page of the journal before holding it out for me to see.

“The first lesson was learning how to approach the symbols,” he said. “The second is learning how to wake them.”

I looked from the page to the drawing still resting in the dirt.

“How?”

“Draw it yourself.”

I looked at the page again before lowering my eyes to the ground.

“The same one?” I asked.

Caius nodded.

“The symbol doesn’t create your gift,” he said. “It helps you reach it.”

Hooked back at him.

“So the power is already inside me?”

“It always has been

I thought about that as I picked up the stick.

Carefully, I copied the symbol into the dirt beside the first one.

When I finished, I looked at Caius.

“What now?”

“Stand inside the one you drew.”

I did.

For a moment, nothing changed.

Then I felt something shift deep inside me.

Not around me.

Inside me.

It wasn’t painful.

It wasn’t overwhelming.

It was more like something that had been asleep was beginning to stir.

I caught my breath.

“Caius…”

“I know,” he said quietly.

“What is this?”

“I don’t know.”

He stepped a little closer.

“But I think your gift recognizes the symbol.”

I looked down at my hands. Silver light appeared across my skin, then disappeared.

“It stopped.”

“For now,” he said.

I looked back at him.

“This isn’t about forcing your gift awake,” he said. “It’s about learning how to answer when it calls.

Howered my eyes to the symbol again.

understood then that the journal wasn’t teaching me magic.

It was teaching me how to reach the magic that had always belonged to me.

Caius waited without saying anything else. I stood inside the symbol and looked down at the lines beneath my feet. The light had disappeared. So had the strange feeling inside me.

“Did I lose it?” I asked.

“No.”

“Then where did it go?”

“It returned to where it came from.”

I frowned.

“So! have to find it again?”

He nodded once.

“Every time.”

I drew a slow breath and closed my eyes. I didn’t force it. I didn’t chase it. I simply remembered what I’d felt a moment earlier.

Gradually, the same feeling returned. It started deep inside me before spreading through the rest of my body. When I opened my eyes, silver light covered my hands once more. I watched it carefully without saying a word.

The glow remained for only a few seconds before disappearing again. I looked at my hands, hoping it would come back. It didn’t. I looked up at Caius instead.

“It answered again,” I whispered.

Caius smiled.

“And tomorrow you’ll make it answer a little faster.”

I looked down at the symbol beneath my feet. The journal had given me a place to begin. The gift was already mine. I just had to learn how to reach it.

Caius bent down and brushed the first symbol out of the dirt with his boot. He turned another page of the journal and stopped halfway through. The symbol waiting there was different from the first. Even at a glance, I could tell it wasn’t meant for the same lesson.

“We’re not using that one today?” I asked.

“No,” Caius replied. “One lesson at a time.”

He closed the journal and tucked it beneath his arm.

“Your gift answered twice today. That’s enough for now. Pushing it further won’t make it stronger”

Hooked back at the empty patch of dirt. Part of me wanted to keep trying. Another part understood why he was stopping me. I knew he wasn't trying to hold me back.

"The next symbol does something different?" I asked.

"It reaches a different part of your gift," he said. "When you're ready, we'll find out which part."

"What happens after I learn all the symbols?" I asked.

Caius met my eyes.

"Well find out together."

I frowned.

"You really don't know?"

"No."

He rested one hand on the journal.

"This has guided every Alpha King before me, but none of them were training a Celestial wolf."

I looked down at the worn pages.

"So some of this is new."

"It is," he said. "We'll learn what comes next when we get there."

Caius closed the journal completely and held it at his side. The lesson was over, even if my mind was still racing. Questions kept coming faster than I could ask them. I had a feeling that wasn't going to change anytime soon.

"Can anyone else see the light?" I asked.

"If it's there, yes."

"So it wasn't only me."

He shook his head.

"No."

I looked down at my hands again. They looked exactly the same as they always had. It was strange how something could change without leaving any sign behind.

“Does the journal say what my gift will become?”

“It doesn’t.”

“What does it say?”

“Only how to help you discover it.”

I nodded slowly.

That answer somehow made me even more curious than before.

Caius glanced toward the sun before looking back at me. We’d been out here longer than I’d realized. The morning had slipped quietly into the afternoon. I hadn’t noticed until now.

“We’re done for today,” he said

I looked around the training ground one more time.

“It doesn’t feel like enough.”

He smiled.

“That’s a good sign.”

I laughed quietly.

“I finally get my gift to answer me, and now you’re ending the lesson.”

“I’m making sure you still have the strength to do it again tomorrow.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

We started walking back toward the pack house together. I looked over my shoulder once at the clearing behind us. The symbols were gone, but I could still picture every line in my mind.

“You’ll remember it,” Caius said.

“I was wondering if I would.”

“You will.”

I smiled to myself.

For the rest of the walk, I kept picturing the symbol in my mind, already looking forward to drawing it again tomorrow.