

# The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

## The price of defiance

(Caius) The rogues who had surrendered were taken back to Wraithbone in chains. Not because I needed them chained. A wolf who had already submitted was not going anywhere. But chains sent a message to everyone who saw them being walked through the territory, to my own pack members, to the warriors in training, to the young wolves who were still learning what it meant to live under my rule. This is what happens when you cross our borders. This is what comes after. I had learned early that ruling was not about the fights you had. It was about the ones that never happened because your reputation made them unnecessary. We arrived back at Wraithbone by early afternoon. The pack house was three times the size of any other pack house in the territory, built on the highest ground for miles in every direction. You could see it from the border on a clear day. That was intentional. Everything about Wraithbone was intentional. Zeron took the rogues to the lower holding cells while I walked inside. My head of counsel, a wolf named Pryor who had served under me since the first year of my reign, was waiting in the main hall with a stack of papers and the look he always had when he had been waiting longer than he wanted to. "You are late," he said. "I was dealing with nine rogues on the eastern border," I said. "Ten, by my count," Zeron said from behind me. "Nine," I said. "One of them is not countable anymore." Pryor looked between us and decided not to ask. He had been around long enough to know when a question was worth asking and when it was not. "The council is waiting for your answer on the Ashcrest visit," he said, falling into step beside me as I walked toward my office. "Tell them we leave in two days," I said. "Twelve warriors, no more. I want to travel fast." "And if Rodan is not prepared for your arrival on such short notice." I stopped walking and looked at Pryor. He cleared his throat. "I will tell them we leave in two days," he said. "Good," I said, and kept walking. The rest of the afternoon was council meetings and border reports and a land dispute between two pack families that had been dragging on for six weeks and had now reached the point where both families were refusing to speak to each other and the tension had started affecting the wolves around them. I listened to both sides in the same room, which neither of them had expected. They had each assumed they would get a private audience. They had each come prepared to tell their version without the other one present to contradict it. That was exactly why I put them in the same room. The dispute was over a strip of land along the river that ran through the eastern side of the territory. Both families had claim to parts of it and both families believed the other had been encroaching. It had started as a border disagreement and turned into something more personal over the weeks, the way these things always did when they were left too long. I let them both speak. I did not interrupt. When they were done I looked at the maps Pryor had laid out and I made a decision in about four minutes that had apparently taken the council six weeks to avoid making. "The river line is the border," I said. "Everything east of it belongs to the Varn family. Everything west belongs to the Cael family. If either family crosses that line for any reason other than fishing rights, which are shared, they answer to me directly." Both families looked like they wanted to argue. Neither of them did. "If this comes back to my table," I said, "I will resolve it differently and neither of you will like how." They left. Pryor gathered his papers. "That has been sitting for six weeks," he said. "I know," I said. "That is too long." He nodded and did not say anything else. In the evening, one of the rogues from the clearing caused a problem. He was one of the older ones, a wolf who had been on our eastern border for two months according to Zeron's count. He had submitted in the field the way the rest of them had, gone down on his knees and lowered his neck, but submission in a field and submission in a cell were two different things and by nightfall he had decided the cell version was

not something he was willing to maintain. He attacked the guard who brought his food. Broke the man's arm before the second guard in the corridor got him back against the wall. I was told about it twenty minutes later. I went down to the cells myself because there were things you sent someone else to handle and there were things you handled yourself, and anything that happened in your own walls while you were standing in them fell into the second category. The rogue was back in his cell by the time I got there. He was large, older than most rogues survived to be, with the kind of stillness that came from years of living outside a pack's structure. He looked at me when I came to stand in front of his cell and he did not look away. Most wolves looked away. "You attacked my guard," I said. He said nothing. "His arm is broken," I said. Still nothing. I looked at him for a moment. He had information, Zeron had said. He had been on the border long enough to have seen things worth knowing. Keeping him alive had been the practical choice this morning. Practical choices were not always permanent ones. "I am going to ask you once," I said. "Who sent you to my border." He looked at me. Then he smiled, which was not the response most wolves in a cell in front of me chose to go with. "Nobody sent me," he said. "I go where I want." "Not anymore," I said. I told the guard outside the cell to open it. What happened after that was quick and it was final and when I walked back out of the cell block the guard with the broken arm was being seen to in the medical room and the other guards in the corridor were very still and very quiet and none of them looked at me directly. Good. Zeron was waiting for me at the top of the stairs. "The others are talking," he said. "Whatever he knew, the rest of them will give it to us now." "See to it tonight," I said. "I want answers before we leave for Ashcrest." "Done," he said. I walked back to my office and stood at the window and looked out at Wraithbone in the dark. The territory was quiet. Fires in the windows of the pack house wings, wolves settling in for the night, the distant sound of the training yard where the night rotation was running drills. This was what I had built. Every piece of it. Every border, every rule, every consequence that kept the whole thing standing. Two days and I would be riding to Ashcrest to remind a mid level alpha what it meant to keep his king waiting. It would not take long. I turned away from the window and went back to work.