The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 46

It’s your choice

(Caius)

I stopped at Isla’s door and knocked.

“It’s Caius,” I said.

I waited.

There was a pause on the other side. No movement at first. Then her voice came through the door.

“I know.”

A few seconds passed.

“You can come in,” she said.

I took the handle and opened the door. Not fast. Enough that she could stop me if she wanted to.

She didn’t.

I stepped inside and left the door open behind me.

She was by the window. Sitting with her legs drawn in, her ankle resting the way Sera had shown her. A book rested in her lap but her eyes weren’t on it.

They were on me.

“You knocked,” she said.

“Yes.”

“And you waited outside.”

“Yes.”

She watched me for a moment. Something in her expression was working through something, not suspicion exactly, more the careful process of someone fitting a new piece of information into a picture they'd been building for a while.

"You don't have to do that," she said. "Wait outside like that. This pack house is yours. You can come in whenever you want."

I looked at her.

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"Before arrived here," I said, "every person who came through a door toward you came without warning and without asking. I didn't want to be another person who did that. So I stayed outside and I knocked and I waited until you decided."

She was quiet for a moment, taking that in.

"And now?" she said.

"Now you're telling me I don't have to," I said. "But I'll still knock. And I'll still wait. Not because I have to. Because I want you to know that what happens on the other side of that door is always your decision. Every time. Without exception."

She looked at me for a long time.

"That's why you sat on the floor outside," she said. "After the nightmare."

"Yes."

She nodded slowly. Something in her face shifted, not dramatically, just enough.

"Alright," she said. "Knock. But you don't have to stand there like you're waiting for a verdict every time."

Something that was almost a response moved through me.

At least she was talking more, that's all that matters.

"Noted," I said.

I moved to the chair across from her and sat. I didn't move closer than that. I didn't reach for her.

The distance between us was comfortable now in a way it hadn't been in the first days. Not absence. Just space that neither of us needed to fill with anything.

The quiet settled between us and I let it sit for a while before I spoke.

“Tell me something about yourself,” I said.

Her gaze shifted slightly.

“What kind of thing?” she said.

“Something you like,” I said. “Not about before. Not about what was done to you. Something that belongs to you.”

Her fingers rested on the book in her lap.

“That’s most of what there is,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “Tell me something else.”

She didn’t answer right away. Her eyes went to the window.

I waited.

Minutes passed.

I didn’t fill the silence.

“I used to watch the rain,” she said.

I nodded once.

“From the door of the shack,” she said. “When it wasn’t coming through the roof.”

“Go on,” I said.

“It didn’t happen often,” she said. “Most times it leaked. The floor would get wet. Everything would. But sometimes it held.” Her fingers shifted slightly against the cover of the book. “On those days would sit in the doorway and watch it. It made everything quiet. No one came by. No one wanted to walk through the mud unless they had to.”

She paused.

“The sound on the roof was loud,” she said. “But it covered everything else. Like it pushed the rest of it away for a while.”

“I liked that,” she said.

I nodded.

I didn’t answer right away. I let her words stay where she’d put them. There was something in the way she’d said it, not with grief, not with bitterness, just plainly, like she was handing me something she’d been keeping in a pocket for a long time and had decided it was safe to take out.

She glanced at me.

“That’s what I have,” she said.

“It’s enough,” I said.

Her gaze moved back to the window.

“Does it rain like that here?” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

“Can you hear it from this room?”

“Yes.”

She nodded.

(It’s your choice

“That would be good,” she said.

“You can sit by the window when it does,” I said. “Or the door if you prefer.”

She looked at me.

“No one will stop me,” she said.

“No.”

She held my gaze for a moment, then nodded.

“Alright.”

Her fingers rested again on the book.

“What do you like?” she said.

I didn’t answer immediately.

She watched me.

“You asked me,” she said.

“I did.”

“So it’s fair to ask back,” she said.

“It is,” I said. “I’m thinking.”

She studied me with that direct look she had.

“You don’t seem like someone who has to think about what they like,” she said.

“Most things I want I go after,” I said. “Liking something quietly without doing anything about it is less familiar territory.”

She considered that.

“What do you like quietly?” she said.

I looked at the window.

“This,” I said. “Sitting in a room where nothing is required of either of us.

She was still for a moment. I watched her process that, the idea that the Alpha King, the man packs surrendered to before he even spoke, could sit in a quiet room with nothing demanded of him and call that something he liked.

Then she looked back at her book and opened it.

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(It’s your choice

“I can’t focus on this,” she said.

“You don’t have to,” I said.

She looked at me.

“There’s nothing I have to do,” she said.

“No.”

She nodded slowly.

“I’m still getting used to that,” she said.

“I know.”

Her gaze moved back to the window.

“I think I’ll like the rain here,” she said.

“I think you will too,” I said.

We sat there a while longer. No more questions. The room was quiet around us and outside the eastern forest was dark and still and somewhere in the pack house the night was going about itself and none of it required anything from either of us.

She had told me something.

Small and simple and entirely hers.

I held onto it carefully, the way you held onto things that mattered, and said nothing else.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 47

I saw him

(Isla)

He left when the fire burned low.

Not abruptly. He stood, said goodnight, and walked out and pulled the door behind him and his footsteps went down the corridor the same way they always did, unhurried and without looking back. I sat by the window for a while after he was gone and looked at the chair he’d been sitting in and thought about the conversation we’d just had.

He’d asked me what I liked.

Nobody had ever asked me that before. Not once in twenty years. The question had sat in front of me like something I didn’t have the right equipment to answer and I’d given him the only honest thing I had, rain through a door that wasn’t leaking, and he had listened like it was worth listening to and said it was enough and meant it.

I picked up the book from my lap and set it on the table beside me.

Caius Blackthorn.

I had grown up hearing that name the way you heard weather warnings, something coming from a distance that you needed to be aware of and prepared for. The stories weren't exaggerations. I'd seen the evidence of them myself. I'd watched him walk into Ashcrest and the entire pack go silent before he said a single word. I'd watched him hit Rodan so hard the wall gave way and then stand in the yard afterward and address sixty wolves in a voice that never once rose above conversational and hold every single one of them in place with it.

He was exactly what they said he was.

And he was also the man who knocked on my door and waited and sat in the chair across the room and asked me what I liked.

I couldn't make those two things fit together and I had been trying since the shack.

Power in Ashcrest had always looked the same. It looked like Rodan's hands behind his back and that particular expression. It looked like Maren's folded hands and the satisfaction she took in having something you needed and deciding whether to give it. Power in Ashcrest was always pointed at something smaller than itself and the pointing was the point.

Caius had power that made everything I'd seen in Ashcrest look like a child's version of the real thing.

And he pointed it away from me.

Every time. Consistently and without making a performance of it. The step back in the library. The door opened slowly. The chair across the room instead of closer. The knock and the waiting. All of it was a choice and he was making it every time with the same consistency that he brought to everything else.

I kept looking for the calculation underneath it.

Every version of careful I had known before had something underneath it that had nothing to do with me. Torvin had been careful with the chain because a damaged ankle made me less useful.

The occasional pack member who had been less cruel than the rest had been careful because cruelty reflected badly on them or because they wanted something from the situation later.

His careful had me at the center of it.

Not as a problem to manage. As a person whose choices were worth accounting for on their own terms. I kept looking for what was underneath that and I kept finding nothing and the nothing was the most disorienting thing about this place.

I thought about what he'd said tonight.

Every person who came through a door toward you came without warning and without asking.

He had noticed that and named it and decided to do something different because of it. Not because someone told him to. Because he had looked at the shape of my experience and understood what it meant and adjusted without being asked.

I looked at the window.

The eastern forest was dark outside and the pack house was quiet around me and somewhere at the other end of the building the Alpha King was presumably going about his evening. Working or reading or simply existing in his own space the way I was existing in mine.

I thought about what he'd said he liked quietly.

Sitting in a room where nothing was required of either of them.

The most powerful wolf alive had just told me that what he liked quietly was sitting in a room doing nothing with me. I turned that over once and then put it down because looking at it directly for too long felt like something I wasn't ready for yet,

I stood up from the window.

My ankle was better in the evenings than mornings and I walked to the bed without difficulty and sat on the edge and looked at the fire.

Tomorrow he would probably be in the library or somewhere in the pack house I had access to and

I saw him

I would see him again and he would be both of those things at once, the man who sent Rodan through a wall and the man who waited outside doors. Both real. Both him.

Maybe that was the point.

Maybe they weren't two versions that needed reconciling. Maybe power used against people who deserved it and care given to the one person he'd decided deserved something different were not contradictions at all.

Maybe that was just who he was.

I lay back and looked at the ceiling.

I wasn’t certain of that yet.

But I was less uncertain than yesterday.

That was new. Uncertainty had always felt like danger to me, the space between not knowing what was coming and finding out had always been where the worst things lived. But this uncertainty was different. It wasn’t the kind that made me press my back against walls. It was the kind that made me want to keep looking, keep paying attention, keep sitting in rooms with him until the picture got clearer.

I stayed where I was and looked at the fire burning down in the hearth and thought that maybe I was starting to understand something about him that the stories about him had never managed to capture.

Not who he was to the world.

Who he was to me.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 48

The bond is real

The bond is real

(Caius)

I found her in the library the next morning.

She was in the chair by the window with a book open in her lap and she looked up when I came in the way she always looked up, that quick assessment that had become familiar to me now, reading the room before deciding how to be in it.

I knocked on the open door.

She almost smiled at that.

“You can come in,” she said.

I crossed to the chair across from her and sat and she watched me settle and waited to find out what I was there for. She had gotten better at waiting without bracing. Not all the way. But better.

“I want to talk to you about the bond,” I said.

She went still in the particular way she went still when something landed that she needed a moment with.

“Alright,” she said.

I looked at her directly because this was not a conversation that deserved anything less than that.

“It’s real,” I said. “What I felt when I found you in the shack. It wasn’t something I manufactured or decided or chose. It arrived the moment I walked through that door and it hasn’t changed since.” I paused. “You’ll feel it too if you don’t already. Wolf or no wolf. The bond doesn’t require a shift to exist. It’s older than that.”

She looked at her hands in her lap.

“I feel something,” she said carefully. “I don’t know what to call it.”

“You don’t have to call it anything yet,” I said.

She looked up at me.

“What does it mean?” she said. “Practically. What does it require?”

“Nothing that you don’t choose,” I said. “That’s what I want you to understand clearly. The bond exists. It will keep existing whether we act on it or not. But nothing happens between us because of it. Nothing happens that you don’t decide on your own terms.”

She was quiet for a moment.

“Most mates don’t work like that,” she said.

“No,” I said.

“The bond pulls,” she said. “I know enough about how it works to know it pulls toward completion. Toward claiming. That’s what they say.”

“It does,” I said. “I won’t pretend it doesn’t. Vorak makes his position on the matter extremely clear on a regular basis.”

Something moved through her expression. Not quite amusement. Close to it.

“But the pull is mine to manage,” I said. “Not yours to accommodate. You’ve spent your whole life having other people’s needs and wants and requirements handed to you as

though they were your responsibility to carry. The bond is not going to be another version of that."

She looked at me for a long time.

"You said you won't claim it until I'm ready," she said. "If I'm ever ready."

"Yes."

"That could be a long time," she said.

"I know," I said.

"It could be never," she said. She said it plainly, not as a test, not as a warning, just as a fact she needed to put in the room to see what happened to it.

"I know that too," I said.

She watched me.

"And you're alright with that," she said.

I considered that carefully before I answered because she deserved a careful answer and not a quick one.

"No," I said. "I won't tell you I'm indifferent to it because I'm not and you'd know I was lying. The bond is real and what I feel because of it is real and the idea of never claiming it is not something I find easy." I looked at her. "But what I want doesn't override what you need. Those two things are not the same weight."

She was very still.

"Why?" she said.

The bond is real

I looked at her.

"Why does it matter to you what I choose?" she said. "You're the Alpha King. You could have walked into that shack and taken me out of it and brought me here and told me how things were going to be and nobody in the territory would have questioned it. Not one person." She paused. "So why does my choice matter to you?"

The question sat in the room between us.

I had known it was coming. Had felt it building in the conversation since I sat down. It was the right question, the most honest question she'd asked me yet, and it deserved an answer that matched it.

The problem was I didn't have a clean one.

'Tell her, Vorak said quietly.

'I'm trying,' I said.

'Then stop trying and just say it,' he said.

I looked at Isla.

"I don't have an easy answer to that," I said. "I've been asking myself the same thing since the shack." I paused. "What I know is that when I found you chained to that floor the thing that hit me first, before the bond, before anything else, was that every choice that had ever mattered to you had been made by someone else. What you ate. Where you slept. Whether you were in pain. All of it decided by other people without you being consulted at all."

She was looking at me with an expression I couldn't fully read.

"And the bond hit me immediately after that," I said. "So the two things arrived together. The understanding of what had been done to you and the knowledge that you were mine." I paused. "I think that's why. Because the first thing I understood about you was that you'd never been given a choice. And I couldn't be the next person who didn't give you one."

The room was quiet.

She looked at her hands again.

"That's not a simple answer," she said.

"No," I said. "I told you I didn't have one."

She was quiet for a long moment.

"The bond," she said. "When you say I'll feel it. I already do. I have since the shack. I didn't know what it was at first." She paused. "It feels like knowing where you are in the building without looking."

I said nothing. Just listened.

“It feels like the air changes when you come into a room,” she said. “Not in a way that’s frightening.

Just in a way that’s there.”

“Yes,” I said.

She looked up at me.

“I don’t know what to do with it,” she said.

“You don’t have to do anything with it,” I said. “It’s just there. It’ll keep being there. You don’t have to decide what it means today or tomorrow or any specific day.”

She nodded slowly.

“But you’d like me to,” she said. “Eventually.”

“Yes,” I said. “Eventually. When you’re ready. If you’re ready.”

She looked at the window.

“I’ll think about it,” she said.

It was not a yes.

It was not a no.

It was Isla Thorne telling me in the only language she currently had available that she was taking the question seriously and that was more than I’d expected when I walked through the door and more than enough for now.

“That’s all I’m asking,” I said.

She nodded once and looked back at her book.

I stayed in the chair a while longer and neither of us spoke and the quiet between us was the same quiet it had been last night, the kind that had shape to it, that meant something without needing words.

Vorak said nothing.

For once he didn’t need to.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 49

* Something is shifting

Something is shifting

(Isla)

I left the library after he did.

Not immediately. I stayed in the chair for a while after his footsteps faded down the corridor and looked at the space where he had been sitting and turned over what he had said.

The bond is real. Nothing happens that you don't choose.

I had expected the careful version. The measured words of a man managing a situation. What I hadn't expected was the honesty underneath it. That he had admitted it cost him something. That the idea of never claiming it was not something he found easy. And then in the same breath had said but what I want doesn't override what you need.

I put the book on the shelf and went downstairs.

The kitchen was past breakfast but I hadn't eaten yet and Dena saw me come in and without a word put bread and fruit on a plate and set it on the small table near the window and went back to what she was doing. I sat down and ate and somewhere in the middle of it I reached for a second piece of bread without calculating whether I was allowed to.

I noticed it after.

My hand was already there, already holding the bread, and my body had not run the usual check first. Had not paused and assessed and decided. Had just reached.

I finished the bread and sat with that for a moment.

Then I went to find Sera for my ankle treatment and the morning went on.

By afternoon my ankle was wrapped and Sera had declared it better than the day before and I walked the eastern corridor without the stiffness that usually followed a morning of rest. I stopped at the library on the way back and stood in the doorway and looked at the chair Caius had sat in and thought about his face when he'd said the bond arrived the moment he walked through that door.

He hadn't looked away when he said it.

I went to the sitting room and put something on the television and watched it without really watching it and thought about his answer to my question. Why does my choice matter to you. He had said he didn't have an easy answer and then given me one of the most direct things anyone had ever said to me. Because the first thing I understood about you was that you'd never been given a choice. And I couldn't be the next person who didn't give you one.

I turned that over until dinner.

The table was the usual gathering. Zeron, Lira, Raith, Pryor, Caius at the head. I took my place and the food came out and the conversation started up the way it always did, easy and without pressure, nobody requiring anything from me and nobody performing ease either, just people at a table going about their evening.

Zeron was talking about two of his younger warriors.

They had gotten turned around in a section of forest they had patrolled for months, he said, and had walked in the wrong direction for nearly two hours before one of them noticed the sun was on the wrong side. He told it with the dry patience of a man who had heard every version of this particular failure and was still faintly baffled that it kept happening.

It caught me off guard.

The laugh came out before I checked whether it was allowed. Small and quiet and real and gone almost as quickly as it arrived but it had been there, genuinely there, and the moment it was out I went still and looked at Caius the way I had always looked at whoever held the most authority in a room after I did something unexpected.

He was already looking at me.

His face was not what I expected.

1 had learned most of his expressions by now. The controlled stillness he wore when he was managing something. The focused attention of someone working through a problem. The almost response that appeared sometimes when something I said landed in an unexpected place.

This was none of those.

It was something quieter and more direct than anything I had seen on him before. Not surprise.

Not warmth in the way warmth usually presented itself. Something that sat underneath both of those things. Like he had been waiting without knowing he was waiting and the

thing he had been waiting for had just happened and the seeing of it had done something to him that he wasn't covering.

I looked away first.

Not because it frightened me. Because it was too much to hold for too long and I didn't have anywhere to put it yet.

Zeron finished his story. The table moved on. Caius said something to Pryor and the conversation continued and nobody made anything of the moment.

Later I sat by my window with my knees pulled up and the forest dark outside and I thought about the laugh. Where it had come from. The fact that it had come at all. Somewhere in the years before the shack and the five years inside it I had stopped laughing the way you stopped doing things that had no place in the life you were living. Not a decision. Just a slow fading.

It had come back over a story about two lost warriors.

And Caius had seen it happen and his face had done that thing I still couldn't name.

I looked at the forest and thought about the bread earlier. The hand that had reached without checking first. The laugh that had come without permission. Two small things on the same day that had nothing to do with surviving and everything to do with something else entirely.

Something was shifting.

Not fixed. Not finished. The girl from the shack was still in me and I didn't think she was going anywhere completely.

But she was getting quieter.

And the room was warm and the forest was still and Caius Blackthorn had looked at me across the table with something on his face that I had no name for and it had not felt like something I needed to protect myself from.

That was new.

That was very new.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 50

(Isla)

I was still at the window when it happened.

Not asleep. Not even close to it. I was sitting with my knees pulled up looking at the forest and thinking about the laugh and Caius's face and the bread earlier and the way the day had felt different from the ones before it without me doing anything to make it different.

And then the heat came.

It started somewhere below my ribs. Not pain. Not quite. More like pressure that had temperature attached to it, a warmth that didn't belong to the room or the fire or anything external. It moved up through my chest and into my throat and then it was gone, as quickly as it had come, leaving nothing behind except the awareness that it had been there.

I sat very still.

I pressed one hand flat against my sternum and felt nothing unusual. My heartbeat. My breathing.

The ordinary interior of a body going about its business.

I stayed at the window for a long time after that and it didn't come back.

Eventually I went to bed and lay in the dark and told myself it was nothing. Stress. The body doing strange things under unusual circumstances. Sera had told me the wolfsbane exposure had suppressed my system in ways that would take time to clear. That was probably all it was.

I told myself that and almost believed it.

I was almost asleep when it came back.

This time it was behind my eyes. Not pain. Pressure. A building thing that sat at the back of my skull and pressed forward and made the dark behind my eyelids feel less like nothing and more like something waiting. I opened my eyes and looked at the ceiling and breathed and after a minute it eased back and the room was just a room again and the ceiling was just a ceiling.

I lay there and did not move.

I knew what wolves felt when their wolf was close to the surface. I had grown up in a pack and I had watched it happen to other people my whole life. The heat. The pressure. The way the senses sharpened in the moment before a shift. I had watched it happen to my father and to Brent and to pack members going about their days and I had watched it

from the outside for twenty years because it was something that happened to other people, to wolves, to people who had something inside them that I had been told I did not have.

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1.3 under my skin

I had been told that for so long that I had accepted it the way I had accepted everything else.

And now there was heat under my skin and pressure behind my eyes and I didn't know what to do with either of those things.

The not naming was important.

I understood that about myself clearly. I had learned very young that hoping for things was a particular kind of dangerous. Not because hope itself was bad but because the distance between hoping and not getting was a place I had been too many times and each time it had cost something I couldn't get back. The first time I hoped my father would step between me and

Rodan. The times I hoped someone at that table would say enough. The years I hoped the chain was temporary.

Hope had a specific texture in my experience and it felt like this, like something building under the surface that I was trying not to look at directly because looking at it directly made it real and real things could be taken.

So I didn't look at it directly.

I knew what I was afraid to hope for.

I had been wolfless for twenty years. Had been told I was wolfless so consistently and by so many people and in so many different ways that it had become part of how I understood myself. Not just something that was wrong with me. Something that was fundamentally true about me, a defining absence that explained everything else, why I had no value in the pack, why the chain was justified, why I was something to be managed rather than someone to be considered.

If that wasn't true.

I stopped the thought there.

Every time it got to that point I stopped it and put it somewhere I couldn't see it and went back to whatever I was doing. Because if I let it finish, if I let myself sit with the full version of what I was almost thinking, and then it turned out to be nothing, just the wolfsbane clearing from my system and my body adjusting, then I would have given something to the hoping and losing it would cost more than I could currently afford.

I had gotten this far by being careful about what I let myself want.

So I was being careful.

I lay in the dark and I felt the faint residual warmth under my skin and I listened to the pack house settle around me and I did not name it and I did not hope and I told myself that tomorrow would just be a day and whatever was happening under my skin was something I could keep managing

TUE quietly until it either became something or it didn't.

Both of those outcomes were survivable.

I had survived worse.

I closed my eyes and let the dark be what it was and waited for sleep to come.

It came slowly.

And in the space before it arrived I thought about Sera and whether I should tell her. Not tonight

Not yet.

Whatever this was it was mine for now, sitting under my skin in the dark where nobody could reach it or take it or tell me what it meant before I was ready to hear it.

It was a small thing to keep. The smallest thing I had ever kept. And somehow that made it easier to hold onto than anything else ever had.

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The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 51

Watching the

Glawn

Watching the shift

(Caius)

I was still at my desk when Vorak started.

Not the usual restlessness. Not the low frustrated pressure he'd been maintaining since the shack, the one that came from wanting to claim what was his and being told to wait. This was different. This was alert in a way that had nothing to do with patience or impatience. More like a dog lifting its head at a sound too faint for anyone else to hear.

I set my pen down.

'What is it?' I asked.

'Something changed,' he said.

'What kind of something?' I asked.

He was quiet for a moment. Not the quiet of not knowing. The quiet of trying to find the right words for something that didn't have obvious ones.

'She's different,' he said. 'Not different like she's healing. Different like something in her is waking up.'

I sat back in my chair.

'You've felt it before,' I said. 'The bond pulling toward her,

'This isn't the bond,' he said. 'This is something in her. Something that wasn't there before or was there but wasn't moving and now it is.

I looked at the window.

I had felt it too, if I was honest. Not clearly enough to name it. More like a change in the quality of the air when she was nearby, something that had been there since the shack but had shifted recently into something more present. I had put it down to the bond strengthening as she settled into Wraithbone, as she ate more and started looking at the world around her with something other than pure survival in her eyes.

But Vorak was not describing the bond and he was not wrong about things like this.

I picked the pen back up and finished the paragraph I'd been working on and closed the document and sat for a moment in the quiet of my office.

Zeron knocked and came in without waiting, the way he did when something was on his mind and he'd decided I should know about it.

"You've been watching her more than usual," he said.

Not an accusation. Just an observation from a man who noticed things.

"Yes," I said.

He came and stood on the other side of the desk and waited. He was not going to ask why. That was not

Watching the hil how 7eron operated. He stated what he had observed and left space for me to do what I wanted with it.

Is there something I should know about?" he asked.

"Not yet," I said. "Just be aware of her. If anything seems different when you're around her note it and tell me. Don't push anything and don't say anything to her about it."

He nodded once without asking what he was supposed to be looking for. That was one of the things that made him valuable. He trusted that I had reasons for what I asked and he acted on the instruction without requiring an explanation first.

"Sera?" he asked.

"Sera will notice on her own," I said. "She's already looking."

He nodded again and left and I sat alone in my office.

Vorak was still doing the alert thing. That quiet focused attention that was different from everything he'd been doing since the shack. He wasn't pushing. He wasn't frustrated. He was just there, at the edge of my awareness, pointed in the direction of the east wing where Isla was in her room, listening to something I couldn't quite hear.

'You felt it at dinner,' I said.

'Yes,' he said.

'The laugh,' I said.

'Before the laugh, he said. 'When she reached for the bread. Something moved in her. Small. But it moved.'

I thought about that.

‘She doesn’t know what it is,‘ I said.

‘No,‘ he said. ‘But she’s noticed something. I can feel it.’

I looked at the window for a long time.

I had been paying attention since the library, since the afternoon she had looked at the door when Raith came through it and her body had done nothing. I had noticed it and filed it without commenting on it the way I filed most things that required more information before they became something I could act on.

At dinner I had watched her laugh.

That was the clearest thing. The laugh had been small and brief and she had looked at me immediately after with the expression she wore when she’d done something without checking first, waiting to find out what it would cost. But before she looked at me, in the half second before the checking instinct kicked in her face had been open in a way I had not seen it before. Something had come through it that wasn’t managed or careful or held back.

Vorak had gone very still in that moment.

Not the frustrated stillness of restraint. The stillness of a wolf paying attention to something it recognised.

Whatever was happening in her was happening in its own time and in its own way and the most important

Watching the ult

Clapen thing I could do was exactly what I had been doing, which was to be present without pressing, to give her a place safe enough for whatever was building in her to build without interference.

Wolfsbane suppressed a wolf. Had suppressed hers, if she had one, from the age of fifteen. Five years of constant exposure, not the kind that incapacitated but the kind that kept everything underneath it quiet and contained and unable to surface.

The wolfsbane was gone now.

Had been gone since the chain was removed.

And something in her was moving that hadn’t been moving before.

‘We wait,’ I said.

“We wait, Vorak agreed. He didn’t sound frustrated about it this time. He sounded the way he sounded before something he had been certain of for a long time was finally about to prove him right.

I picked the pen back up and went back to work.

But I kept the window in the corner of my eye and Vorak stayed alert beside me and neither of us said anything else about it.

Not yet.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 52

Not certain yet–1

(Isla)

Sera came just before midday, the same way she usually did when she wanted to check my ankle. I heard her knock and closed the book in my lap even though I had not read a full page in several minutes. The morning had passed quietly, and I had stayed near the window, watching the eastern forest while trying not to think too directly about the warmth from the night before. It had not returned, but the memory of it stayed under my skin like something waiting. When she knocked, I felt a small shift inside me, not fear, just awareness. I told myself it was routine and nothing more.

“Come in,” I said.

She entered with her case in her hand and closed the door behind her without noise. Her expression was calm and focused, the same one she always wore when she worked. She moved toward the bed and set the case down in the same place she always used. Nothing in her manner suggested anything unusual, and for a moment I wondered if I had imagined the sense that something had changed. She glanced at my ankle and then at my face as if checking both at once. The room settled into the familiar quiet that came whenever she was treating me.

“Routine check,” she said. “And the ankle.”

I nodded and shifted to sit where she usually worked. The movement pulled slightly at the skin around the healing burn, but it did not hurt the way it had a few days ago. She knelt in front of me and began unwrapping the bandage with steady hands. I watched her fingers, the calm rhythm of her movements, and felt my body relax slightly in response. Her presence always carried that effect, not comfort exactly, but something close to it. She worked without speaking for a moment, and the silence felt normal.

“Any soreness this morning?” she asked.

“Less,” I said. “It loosened faster.”

She nodded once and pressed lightly along the skin. Her touch was careful, testing rather than probing. I watched her face for signs of concern and saw none. The skin looked better than it had the day before, less red, less irritated. She adjusted the wrap and smoothed it in place with slow, even movements. Everything about the check felt routine.

“This is healing well,” she said. “Faster than expected.”

I did not answer right away, because I had noticed that too. My body felt stronger each day, not just in the ankle but everywhere. The food, the rest, the absence of stress, all of it had begun to show. I flexed my foot slightly, and the movement came easier than it had yesterday. She watched the motion carefully. Then she finished the wrap and reached for her case.

But she did not close it.

Instead she remained still, her hand resting on the edge. Her eyes lifted to my face, studying me in a way that felt different from before. It was not concern, not exactly. It was assessment, more focused than usual. I noticed the change immediately. Something in her attention had sharpened.

“Any other changes?” she asked.

Notcettar

The question was new.

“Like what?” I said.

“Sleep? Energy? Feeling warm? Anything unusual?”

Cla

I went quiet. The warmth from the night before moved into my thoughts again. I had not decided whether to tell her. I had planned to wait. But she was asking directly now.

“I slept,” I said. “Better.”

She nodded slowly, but her eyes stayed on me.

“And today?” she asked.

“I feel normal.”

She studied me for a moment longer. Then she reached forward and took my wrist. Her fingers rested lightly against my skin. She was not checking pulse the usual way. She seemed to be feeling for something else. I stayed still and let her.

Halfway through, she went very still.

It was subtle but clear. Her hand stopped moving. Her eyes sharpened. Her attention shifted entirely to what she was sensing. I watched her face and tried to read it. I could not. Her expression had gone neutral in a way that meant she was thinking.

She did not remove her hand.

“Have you felt warm?” she asked.

Not certain yet–2

“Yes,” I said.

“When?”

“Last night.”

“Where?”

I hesitated. The memory felt private, something I had been holding carefully. But she was waiting, and her attention did not move.

“Here,” I said, touching my chest. “And later behind my eyes.”

Her fingers pressed slightly more firmly against my wrist.

“Did it hurt?” she asked.

“No.”

“Dizziness?”

“No.”

“Did your hearing change?”

“I noticed sounds earlier than usual.”

“Smell?”

“Maybe sharper. I’m not sure.”

She released my wrist slowly. Her expression had changed again, but I still could not read it. She stood and took a step back, then returned. Her movements were measured, as if she was organizing thoughts before speaking again. I watched her carefully.

“How long did the warmth last?” she asked.

“Less than a minute.”

“And the pressure?”

“The same.”

“How many times?”

“Twice.”

She nodded and looked toward the window briefly. Then she turned back to me. Her attention remained focused in a way I had not seen before.

“Did it happen while you were moving?” she asked.

Not staye

No

“While resting?”

“Yes.”

She inhaled slowly and sat beside me. The shift in posture made the moment feel more serious. I felt my body become more alert in response. The room seemed quieter than before.

“When it happened,” she asked, “did you feel anything else? Uneasy? Alert?”

“Alert,” I said. “Like something was about to happen. But nothing did.”

She nodded once. Her gaze moved across my face again, studying small details. I tried not to shift under the attention. Her calm usually made me relax, but now it made me aware.

“Any change this morning?” she asked.

“No.”

“Any pain now?”

“No.”

She stood again and walked a few steps across the room, then came back. Her movements were controlled, but I sensed tension in them. She stopped in front of me.

“When you felt it in your chest,” she asked, “did it spread?”

“Yes.”

“Upward?”

“Yes.”

“And behind your eyes?”

“Pressure. Then gone.”

She went quiet. Her expression settled into something i could not interpret. She seemed to be deciding something internally. I waited without speaking. The silence stretched.

“I’m not certain yet,” she said. “But I want to watch this.”

I nodded slowly.

She picked up her case and closed it, but she did not move toward the door immediately. Her eyes remained on me. I felt the weight of that attention more strongly now. Something in her had changed during the examination. I did not know what she had noticed, but I knew she had noticed something.

“I want to come back tomorrow,” she said. “Same time.”

“Alright.”

“If it happens again, will you tell me?”

“Yes”

“If anything else changes?”

“I’ll let you know.”

She nodded once. Her fingers tightened slightly on the handle of the case. It was the first visible sign of uncertainty I had seen from her. Then she turned toward the door. She paused with her hand on the handle.

For a moment she remained there without opening it. Then she looked back at me. Her expression was composed again, but not fully. Something in her eyes remained unsettled.

“Tomorrow,” she said.

“Tomorrow,” I repeated.

She opened the door and stepped out. Her footsteps moved down the corridor, quieter than usual. I stayed where I was and listened until they faded. The room felt different after she left. Not unsafe. Just changed.

I sat on the bed and looked at my hands. The warmth had not returned. My body felt normal. But now the moment belonged to more than just me. She had seen something. She had felt something. Her questions had not been routine.

She had gone very still.

I stood and walked to the window. The forest moved gently in the distance. The day outside looked unchanged. Pack members crossed the grounds. Nothing reflected what had just happened.

But something had.

The smallest thing under my skin felt more real now. Not stronger, not louder, just acknowledged. I pressed my palm against the glass and watched the trees. Tomorrow she would check again. Tomorrow she might say more.

I stayed by the window and let the quiet settle around me.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 53

Buried too long

(Caius)

Sera came to my office just after dusk.

I knew it was her from the knock. Three even taps, spaced the same way every time. She never changed it. Most people did not keep patterns that exact unless they meant to. Sera always meant to. I set my pen down before answering. Vorak lifted his attention at once, not pushing, just alert in the same way he had been earlier. I had already been expecting her.

“Come in,” I said.

She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. Her case was in her hand, but she did not set it down right away. That told me enough. She had seen Isla. She had noticed something. The same thing Vorak had felt earlier. I stood from behind the desk and waited.

“You noticed it,” she said.

It was not a question.

“Yes,” I said.

She nodded once. “So did I.”

The room settled into silence for a moment. Not tense, just focused. She moved to the chair near the desk and placed her case there. Then she turned back to me. Her expression was calm, but there was care in it now.

“She reported warmth,” Sera said. “Last night. In her chest. Later behind her eyes. Brief. No pain. This morning her senses were slightly sharper. Small changes. But consistent.”

Vorak went still inside me.

‘I told you,’ he said.

I ignored him and kept my eyes on Sera. “You confirmed it”

“I felt it,” she said. “Faint. Not fully surfaced. But it is there.”

I moved around the desk and stood near the window. The eastern grounds were dark outside. Somewhere beyond them Isla was in her room. The same quiet building. The same walls. But something inside her had changed.

“Her wolf,” I said.

Sera nodded. “Yes.”

I did not move. “Say it clearly.”

“It is not absent,” she said. “It never was.”

The words settled into place. Not shock. Confirmation. Vorak had already recognized something. I had felt it at dinner. The laugh. The small changes. The sense of presence strengthening. Now the shape of it was elear

Vorak lifted in quiet certainty.

‘She has one,‘ he said.

‘Yes.’

Sera continued. “It was suppressed. Deeply. For years. Not only by the chain. That came later. I believe it began much earlier. Possibly childhood. Repeated exposure, Stress. Malnutrition. All of it layered together.”

I thought of the report again. The early injuries. The absence of care. The household that had chosen silence. The years before fifteen that already carried damage.

“Prolonged wolfsbane,” I said.

“Yes” she said. “Not enough at once to cripple. Enough over time to bury development. If a wolf is prevented from surfacing during key years, the body adapts. It does not erase the wolf. It forces it down.”

I turned back toward her.

“And now.”

“It is waking,” she said. “Slowly. But definitely. The signs are early. Heat. Sensory shift. Internal pressure. All consistent with a wolf stirring after long suppression.”

Vorak pressed forward, not demanding, just watching.

‘She is coming back,‘ he said.

‘Yes.’

“Does she know?” I asked.

“No,” Sera said. “I told her I noticed something. I kept it general. She does not know what it is yet.”

“You set another check.”

“Yes,” she said. “I will see her again tomorrow. I want to confirm before I tell her anything.”

“Good.”

Sera studied me. “You agree.”

“She should not carry uncertainty,” I said. “Not with her history. If we tell her too early, she will hold hope and fear at the same time. That is not something she needs.”

Sera nodded once. “That was my judgment.”

I leaned against the desk and let the information settle deeper. This did not change everything at once. It did not erase the years. It did not remove the caution she lived with. But it shifted the foundation beneath all of it.

She had never been what they said she was.

Roncad tea lesen

She had never been empty.

She had been forced quiet.

Vorak settled with a quiet satisfaction.

‘They were wrong,‘ he said.

‘Yes.‘

Sera spoke again. “You noticed before I did.”

“Not clearly,” I said. “Only small things.”

“The laugh,” she said.

“Yes”

“And the food.”

“Yes.”

wwwwwwww

She nodded. “That fits. When a wolf begins to surface, behavior shifts first. Instinct responses returning. Body awareness increasing. Small choices made without fear first.”

I filed that away.

“Suppression has a cost,” Sera said. “Her body will have to relearn what it was prevented from doing. There may be discomfort as it surfaces. That is normal.”

“I know,” I said.

“What do you need from me?” I asked.

“Nothing different,” she said. “Do what you have been doing. Stability. No pressure. Let this happen at its own pace.”

I nodded.

“If it accelerates.”

“I come to you,” she said. “And to her.”

I turned back to the window.

Not absent.

Suppressed.

Waking.

I’

The words aligned with what I had already begun to understand. The bond had felt incomplete in a way I had never named. Not broken. Not weak. Just waiting. Now I understood why.

Her wolf had been there all along.

{&ap%sv£ubt! bobs

Buried.

And now it was moving.

Vorak spoke quietly “She will feel us more soon.”

“Yes.”

“She will understand.”

“In time.”

He did not push further.

Sera picked up her case. “I will monitor her closely.”

“Tell me after tomorrow,” I said.

“I will.”

She moved toward the door, then paused. “Alpha King.”

I looked at her.

Cla

“I have seen delayed wolves,” she said. “I have seen frightened wolves. I have seen weak ones. This is not that. This is a wolf that was held down and is beginning to push back. It matters.”

“I know,” I said.

She nodded and left.

I remained where I was.

The office was quiet again. The report on the desk. The fire low. Nothing outwardly different. But the understanding settled deeper the longer I stood there.

She had not been empty.

She had been forced silent.

And now something inside her was beginning to answer again.

I stayed there a long time before I moved.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 54

The truth she was denied–1

(Isla)

Sera came for me the next morning at the same time she had the day before.

I had been awake for hours by then. The sun was only just coming up over the eastern forest and I was already dressed and sitting by the window with the book open in my lap. I had not read much of it. My eyes kept going to the trees and then back to the page and then away again. The warmth had not returned during the night, but I had slept lightly

and every time I woke I checked for it before I checked anything else. When Sera knocked, I closed the book at once and told her to come in.

She entered with the same case in her hand and the same calm expression on her face, but something under it was different. I noticed that immediately. Not alarm. Not urgency. More like she had made a decision and was carrying it carefully. She set the case down and looked at me for a moment before she spoke.

“How was the night?” she asked.

“Quiet,” I said. “Nothing happened.”

She nodded once. “No warmth? No pressure?”

“No.”

“Any changes in your hearing? Your smell? Your skin?”

I thought about it before answering. “Things feel clearer sometimes,” I said. “Not all the time. Just for a moment. Then it goes back.”

Her eyes stayed on mine. “How often?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I only notice it after.”

She nodded again. Then she moved to the bed and opened the case and waited for me to sit where she wanted me. I went without argument. The routine of it helped. The wrap on my ankle came off, she checked the skin, pressed lightly along the healing burn, and I watched her hands the way I always did. Her face gave me nothing I could use. It was focused and careful and closed in the way people closed themselves when they knew something I did not.

“The ankle is better,” she said.

“I know.”

“You’ve been walking more?”

“A little.”

“Good.”

She wrapped it again with the same steady hands. Then she did not close the case. She sat back on her heels and looked up at me and the room changed without anything in it actually moving. I knew something was coming. Not from the words. From the way she

had gone still inside herself. The same thing had happened yesterday when her hand was on my wrist.

–“What is it?” I asked.

She stood and moved to the chair by the window. “Come and sit,” she said.

That was not part of the usual check. I did not ask again. I got up and crossed to the chair across from her and sat. The book stayed where I had left it. The window was between us and the forest beyond it was lit by the thin grey light of morning. I put both hands in my lap and waited.

Sera looked at me for a long moment. “I want you to hear this clearly,” she said. “And I want you to hear all of it before you decide what it means.”

I felt myself go very still.

“Alright,” I said.

She took a breath. “You are not wolfless.”

The words entered the room and stayed there.

I did not answer. I did not move. For a moment all I could hear was the quiet of the pack house around us and the faint sound of something outside on the grounds below. I looked at her face and found it unreadable. That made it worse, because if she had looked uncertain I could have put this somewhere safe and waited for it to pass. She did not look uncertain.

“I need you to say that again?” I said.

“You are not wolfless,” she repeated. “Your wolf is there.”

I stared at her.

No.

That was the first thing in my head. Not because I thought she was lying. Because the words did not fit into anything I knew how to hold. I had been told something different for twenty years. It had shaped every part of my life. The way my father looked at me. The way Rodan decided what I was. The way the pack had spoken about me and around me. The chain. The shack. Every single part of it rested on the same foundation.

The

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 55

truth she was denied–2

Wolfless.

Nothing there.

No wolf.

I heard my own voice before I felt myself decide to speak. “No.”

Sera did not interrupt.

“I didn’t shift,” I said. “At fifteen I didn’t shift. Nothing happened. They waited and nothing happened.”

“I know,” she said.

“I have never felt a wolf.”

“I know.”

I looked at her and anger came up so fast it surprised me. “Then how can you sit there and tell me this now?”

Her face did not change. “Because I am not guessing.”

I looked away from her. Out the window. At the trees I could not actually see because all I could see was the yard at Ashcrest and my fifteenth birthday and Rodan’s face and my father’s eyes on the ground and the first night in the shack and the chain that came later. My hands had gone cold in my lap.

“You said it was there,” I said. “Then where has it been?”

“Suppressed,” she said. “Forced down. Quieted for so long that your body adapted around the silence.”

I turned back to her. “By what?”

She did not answer immediately. “Most likely prolonged wolfsbane exposure from a young age, combined with stress and malnutrition and everything else done to your body over time.”

The room seemed to tilt around that.

“From a young age?” I said.

“Yes.”

“Before the chain?”

“Yes.”

I’

I looked at her and for one awful moment the answer was too large to hold. It moved through everything at once Childhood. The house. The kitchen. The years before the shack that I had spent telling myself were bad but survivable because at least they had happened before the chain and the floor ring and the shack door. I thought about all the things in the report I had not seen but knew existed because Caius had gone through them and looked at people with those unreadable eyes after.

“They did that too?” I said.

Sera held my gaze. “Yes.”

I looked down at my hands. They were not shaking. That surprised me. I expected them to be. Instead they sat very still in my lap while something much deeper moved through me and made it hard to breathe properly. I had spent so long building myself around one truth that the removal of it left nothing firm underneath at first.

“If what you’re saying is true,” I said carefully, “then everything that came after?”

“Was built on a lie,” Sera said.

I closed my eyes.

Not for long. Just long enough to stop the room from feeling too bright. When I opened them again she was still there, same chair, same expression, same certainty. She was not taking it back. She was not softening it. She was just sitting there with the truth laid out between us and waiting for me to reach it in my own time.

“You said it was suppressed,” I said. “Why now?”

“Because the wolfsbane is gone,” she said. “Because your body is finally resting. Because you are eating regularly. Because fear is not using everything you have every hour of the day.” She paused. “Because whatever was held down is beginning to push back.”

I thought about the warmth in my chest. The pressure behind my eyes. The moments where the world seemed clearer than before. The alertness that came with no obvious cause. The feeling under my skin l had refused to name because naming it made it real and real things had a way of being taken.

And now it was real anyway.

“I thought it was nothing,” I said.

“No,” she said. “It was not nothing.”

I laughed once, but there was nothing amused in it. “That would have been easier?”

“Yes,” she said. “It would.”

I looked at her sharply. “Does Caius know?”

Sera’s expression did not change. “Yes.”

Of course he did.

The answer landed in me with less shock than it should have. Of course he knew. He noticed everything. He had likely known before I did that something was changing. He and his wolf had probably felt it before there were even words for it. The thought should have unsettled me. It did not. Not in the way most things did.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 56

The truth she was denied–3

“What did he say?” I asked

“Very little,” she said. “He agreed that you should hear this only when I was certain.”

I looked at the window again.

That sounded like him. Not rushing in with answers. Not turning the moment into something about what he felt or wanted from it. Waiting until it could be spoken clearly. Giving it space first. I did not know why that mattered to me in this moment. But it did.

“Will it happen all at once?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Sera said honestly. “Maybe not. There may be more heat. More pressure. More sharpening in your senses. You may feel anger differently. Hunger differently. Space differently. Or it may stay small a little longer and build from there.” She paused. “I need you to tell me when it changes.”

I nodded once.

She leaned forward slightly, not enough to crowd me. “Luna, look at me.”

I did.

“This does not mean you have to become something by tonight or tomorrow,” she said. “There is no failure in this if it takes time. There is no failure if it hurts. There is no failure if you are frightened.”

Something in my chest moved at that. Not warmth. Something else. Something like grief turned in another direction.

“I don’t know what to do with this,” I said.

“You don’t have to do anything with it yet,” she said. “You only have to know that it is true.”

I sat with that.

True.

Not hope. Not maybe. Not if. True.

It should have felt good. Clean. Simple. It did not. Not yet. It felt too large and too late and too tangled up with everything that had been done in the years before it. But under all of that, under the anger and the disbelief and the sense of something breaking open in a way I could not control, there was another feeling. Small. Careful. Barely there.

Mine.

My wolf.

I looked down at my hands and thought, not for the first time, that the smallest things were the hardest to hold because they mattered most.

“I need some time,” I said.

Sera nodded. “Take it

“She stood and closed the case and left it where it was for a moment. “I will come back later,” she said.

“Not to ask more questions. Just to check on you.”

I nodded again.

She moved to the door, then stopped and looked back at me. “Whatever they told you about yourself was wrong.”

I could not answer that. Not yet.

After she left I stayed where I was. The room was still the same room. The forest was still outside the window. The book was still on the chair by the glass. Nothing had changed around me.

Everything had changed inside me.

I sat there for a long time and let the words move through me without trying to make them smaller. Not wolfless. Never was. Suppressed. Waking.

By the time I finally stood, the room felt different. Not safer. Not less safe. Just different, like I was standing in the same place with a second life laid underneath the first one and for the first time I knew it was there.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 57

Twill wait with you

(Caius)

I stopped outside her door and stood there for a moment before raising my hand to knock.

Vorak had been quiet since Sera left my office but not relaxed. He remained attentive in the particular way he got when something important was unfolding and he wanted to be present for every part of it. Isla knew now and whatever Sera had told her would be sitting in her in layers, some of it landing clearly and some of it still finding its level. I understood that. Twenty years built on a particular understanding of yourself did not shift in a single conversation no matter how carefully that conversation was handled.

I knocked three times and said my name and waited.

There was no movement at first. Then I heard something small from inside the room, the quiet sound of something being set aside. A few seconds passed. I kept my hand at my side and my weight where it was and I did not reach for the handle. She was deciding and the deciding was hers to do in her own time.

“You can come in,” she said.

I opened the door and stepped inside and left it open behind me. She was sitting on the bed rather than by the window. The phone rested in her hands and the screen was lit and she had been using it, which told me something. When Isla was overwhelmed she went still and silent and turned inward. The fact that she was doing something, keeping herself anchored in a task, told me she was managing. She looked up when I stepped inside and her expression was composed but there was something working through the deeper layers of it, something new that hadn’t been there this morning.

I crossed to the chair across from her and sat without moving closer than I needed to.

She watched me settle. Neither of us spoke immediately and neither of us needed to. The quiet between us had become something over the past weeks that didn’t require filling. It was just the space we both existed in when words weren’t ready yet.

“You came to check on me,” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

“Not to explain anything,” she said.

“No,” I said. “Sera did that. I came because I wanted to see how you were.”

She looked at me for a moment with that direct searching look she had, the one that was looking for the gap between what was said and what was meant. I held it without looking away and gave her time to find whatever she was looking for.

“I don’t know how I am,” she said. “Not exactly.”

“That’s alright,” I said. “You don’t have to know yet.”

Her thumb moved lightly across the phone screen, not purposeful, just grounding herself in something physical while she thought. I watched the motion and said nothing. Vorak remained steady, present but not pressing, the way he had learned to be when she was processing something.

4 keep thinking about the shack,” she said after a while. “Not about being there. About what it means that I Thad a wolf all along and nobody knew Not Rodan. Not my family. Not even me.”

“Including you,” I said. “That matters. You were not hiding from it or refusing it. You genuinely didn’t know.”

She nodded slowly. “Sera said the same thing,” she said. “That it wasn’t a failure. That the exposure was the reason and not anything I did or didn’t do.“.

“She’s right,” I said.

Isla looked down at the phone and tapped the screen to wake it. She had been reading something and I could see the text on the screen from where I sat but I did not try to read it. Whatever she had been looking at was hers to look at.

“I started looking things up,” she said. “About wolves and shifting and what it feels like. Most of it doesn’t apply to me.”

“Most of it won’t,” I said. “Your situation isn’t like anything documented. Sera knows more about what to expect than anything you’ll find there.”

She nodded. “I know,” she said. “I just needed to do something.”

I understood that completely. She had spent weeks learning how to exist without constant doing and she had gotten better at it but when something this large landed the instinct to act, to research, to prepare, was not surprising. It was who she was.

“Your safety here doesn’t depend on any of this,” I said. “I want to say that clearly. Nothing that Sera told you changes what you are here or how this works.”

She looked at me. “I know,” she said. “I think I know that.”

“The uncertainty is the part I want to talk about,” I said.

Something moved through her expression that was almost a response to that. She looked at her hands and then back at me. “I keep waiting for the version of this where it matters differently,” she said. “Where having a wolf changes what I’m worth here.”

“It doesn’t,” I said. “It never did and it won’t.”

She held my gaze for a long time. The searching look was there again and I let her search. She was not going to believe it from one conversation and I was not asking her to. I was asking her to hold it and look at it and let the evidence accumulate the way it had been accumulating since the shack.

“I believe you,” she said finally. “More than I did yesterday.”

“That’s good to know,” I said.

She set the phone down on the bed beside her and did not pick it back up. That small change did not escape me. She no longer needed it as something to hold onto for the moment. The room was quiet around us and the fire was low in the hearth and outside the eastern forest was dark beyond the window.

“I’m not afraid,” she said. “I want to be clear about that. I’m uncertain but I’m not afraid.”

“I know,” I said. “The difference between those two things is significant and I noticed it.”

She nodded once. “Will you tell me If you notice things?” she asked. “If Vorak notices things before I do. “Will you tell me?”

“Yes,” I said. “If you want me to.

“I want you to,” she said. “I’d rather know.”

I stood from the chair and she watched me rise. “I’ll let you rest,” I said. “You’ve had a full day.”

“You’ll still knock,” she said. It was not quite a question.

“Every time,” I said. “Without exception.”

She nodded and picked the phone back up and her fingers moved across it with more confidence than they had a week ago. She was alright. Not fixed, not finished, but alright, which was all today needed her to

I stepped out and pulled the door closed behind me and stood in the corridor for a moment.

Vorak settled beside me in the particular way he settled when something had gone the way it needed to

‘She’s alright,’ he said.

‘Yes,‘ I said.

‘She asked you to tell her,’ he said. ‘When we notice things.‘

‘I know,‘ I said.

‘That’s trust,‘ he said.

I looked at the closed door for a moment and then walked back down the corridor toward my office.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘It is.‘

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 58

The first real fury–1

(Isla)

He left and I stayed where Twas.

The phone rested in my hands again, but wasn’t using it. The screen had gone dark and my thumb lay across it without moving. I looked at the door after it closed and listened to his footsteps fade down the corridor and then I looked at the phone and then at the fire and then back at nothing at all. The room was quiet, too quiet for the kind of thoughts now moving through me.

Your safety here doesn’t depend on any of this.

He’d said it plainly. No conditions. No hidden shape to it. Wolf or no wolf, shifting or not shifting, time or no time, nothing about my place here changed. He’d said it the way he said everything, without dressing it up or trying to make it easier than it was, and I believed him. That was the part that sat strangely in me. I believed him, and once that settled, other things had room to rise.

I put the phone beside me and leaned back against the headboard.

At first it was only thought. Not feeling. Thought was easier. Thought could be arranged and examined and moved from one place to another until it made enough sense to live with. Feeling was harder. Feeling didn’t ask permission before it arrived. I thought about what Sera had said. I thought about the chain. I thought about the years before the chain. I thought about a wolf under all of it, buried and quiet and pressed down until even I believed there was nothing there at all.

I thought about my father.

That was where it started.

Not with Rodan. Not with Maren. My father. Because Rodan had always been exactly what he was. Maren too. Cruelty in them didn’t surprise me anymore, not after enough years of watching it. But my father had been the first shape of safety I ever knew, even if it was a

weak one, even if it hadn't lasted long, even if it had mostly been my own child mind filling in what was missing because children did that when they needed to survive. Father meant something to a child before the child understood whether the man deserved the word.

And he'd asked for the chain.

My breathing changed.

I sat up straighter without meaning to. The thought landed in me harder now than it had when I first understood it. Not as information. As fact. A real thing done by a real man to a real child, and that child had been me. He'd seen me, looked at what I was going through, and instead of stepping in front of it he'd gone to Rodan and asked for more of it. Not gone along with it after the decision had been made. Asked for it.

Something moved under my skin.

Heat.

Not the brief uncertain warmth from the night before. This came faster. Stronger. It started under my ribs and spread outward in a rush that made the room feel too close all at once. I got off the bed before I'd Tully decided to move and crossed to the window and stood there with one hand on the frame.

The glass was cool under my palm.

I breathed in and looked out at the dark shape of the forest and thought about my mother. About the distance between the house and the shack. About five years of living close enough to walk there in minutes and never once coming. Not once. Not when it rained. Not when it was cold. Not when I was hungry. Not when I was sick. Not when I had blood on my back or burns on my ankle or nothing in my stomach except what I'd been given because someone else decided I'd earned survival for one more day.

The heat pushed higher.

I closed my eyes.

This was anger.

Not the numb strained version of it I'd lived with before, the kind that was really endurance with a bitter taste under it. Not the anger that had nowhere to go and so turned into the daily work of getting through the next hour. This was clean. Not better. Not easier. Just cleaner. It knew exactly where it wanted to point.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 59

The first real fury–2

At all of them

At Rodan standing in the yard with his hands behind his back while they whipped me. At Maren speaking about practicality with her face composed and her clothes clean. At Brent laughing because he could. At Vera looking away because looking properly would've required something from her she never intended to give. At Helene choosing absence over action for years and years until absence itself became a kind of cruelty.

And under all of them, the thing that made all the others possible.

The lie.

Wolfless.

The word had been in my head so often it had stopped sounding like a word years ago and become more like weather, always there, always hanging over everything, deciding the shape of the day before anything in it even happened. Wolfless girl. Worthless girl. Useless girl. All the things built on top of the first false thing until the false thing was the floor everyone stood on without checking if it was real.

It wasn't real.

That thought hit me so hard I had to grip the window frame with both hands. My father had let them build my life on a lie. My mother had watched it happen on a lie. Rodan had used it. Maren had justified it. Brent had enjoyed it. Every time they called me what I was not, every punishment, every hunger, every order, every humiliation, all of it had rested on something false and they'd known enough to keep going anyway.

The heat flared harder.

It moved up my neck and into my face and behind my eyes. Pressure came with it, stronger than before, enough that I opened my eyes fast and stepped back from the window because the room had started to feel too small. My skin felt wrong. Too close over everything under it. I pressed a hand to my chest and then pulled it away because that didn't help.

I needed air.

I crossed the room quickly, grabbed the thicker coat from the chair, shoved my feet into the shoes nearest the bed, and left before I could think too much about whether I should. The corridor was empty. Good. I didn't want anyone seeing my face right now because I didn't know what was on it and I didn't want to be asked if I was alright when I wasn't

sure I could answer without something breaking out of me that wouldn't fit back in afterward.

The stairs went by under my feet. Then the hall. Then the side door.

Cold hit me the moment I stepped outside.

It was night enough now that the air carried the bite of it properly. I drew it in hard and stood just beyond the doorway with the coat half hanging open because I needed the cold more than I needed comfort. My body reacted to it at once. The heat didn't vanish, but it had something to push against now. Something real and external and opposite.

The thread

I walked farther out into the yard.

The stones under my shoes were cold through the soles. The night air caught at my face and throat and hands. I stood there and breathed and Net it come into me until the worst of the heat under my skin stopped feeling like it might split me open from the inside.

I knew this wasn't only anger.

That was the strange part. The anger was real and it was mine and it was finally large enough to feel honestly, but there was something else in it too. Something waking. Something answering the anger from underneath. The same thing Sera had named. The same thing Caius had told me he wouldn't rush. It was there now, not separate from me but not the same as me either, rising in answer to everything I'd just finally let myself feel.

I stood in the cold and let that thought stay where it was.

Not fully looked at. Not turned away from.

The yard was quiet. Somewhere farther off I could hear movement near the training grounds, a late patrol crossing from one side of the territory to the other. The sounds came clearer than they should have. I noticed that too. The air in my lungs felt sharper. The cold on my face clearer. Even the dark seemed less flat than it had an hour ago.

I thought of Ashcrest again and this time I didn't push the anger down.

I let myself feel it.

I let myself think about the door of the shack and the chain ring in the floor and the days I spent counting things because counting was the only shape I could give pain that made it bearable. I let myself think about the child I'd been before all of it and the lie that had

wrapped around her so fully she'd grown up inside it and called it truth because that was easier than naming what had been done.

They took years from me.

The thought was simple. Not dressed up. Not hidden.

They took years from me and built the taking into the structure of daily life until even I could no longer tell where the cruelty ended and the ordinary began.

My hands had curled into fists without my noticing.

I looked down at them. Opened them. Closed them again. Heat still moved under my skin, but it no longer felt out of control. The cold had done what I needed it to do. It gave the anger edges. Shape. Space enough to stand inside it without being swallowed by it.

I stayed where I was until my breathing evened out.

When I finally looked back toward the pack house, its windows were lit against the dark and something in me settled just enough to know I could go back inside without carrying the full blaze of this into the next room with me. The anger wasn't gone. It shouldn't be gone. For the first time in years it felt honest. Deserved. Mine.

I turned back to the cold one last time and let it press against my face.

A different kind of quiet–1

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 60

A different kind of quiet–1

(Caius)

I was already at the table when she came downstairs.

I'd been there for a few minutes, coffee in front of me, the morning's first documents set aside because Pryor had learned not to bring them before breakfast and I hadn't yet reached for them. The table was set and the kitchen had sent out the first round of food and I was waiting in the way I'd been waiting for most things where she was concerned, without making it obvious and without requiring anything from it.

I heard her on the stairs before she appeared.

Her step was lighter than most wolves her size should produce, a habit of years of moving without wanting to be heard, and it was still there but it was changing in the same way everything else about her was changing, slowly and without announcement. She was moving with more weight behind it than she had when she first arrived. Not louder. More settled. Like someone who'd started to believe the floor would hold.

She came into the dining room and took her place and when the food arrived she reached for it without the pause I'd watched her work through every morning since she arrived. Bread, fruit, the cooked portion, all of it taken without hesitation. She ate with the appetite of someone whose body had finally accepted that the food was real and available and not subject to conditions.

Vorak was quiet in a way he hadn't been since the shack.

Not the alert quiet of the past few days when something in her had been building. Not the restless frustrated quiet of a wolf who wanted something and was being made to wait. Something more settled than both of those. The quiet of a wolf who'd been watching something move toward him for a long time and had decided that watching was enough for now because the arrival was no longer in question.

I understood the feeling.

Zeron was talking at the table and Lira was disagreeing with him about something and Pryor had brought a document again despite my repeated instructions and Raith was eating with his usual focused efficiency. Isla was listening to Zeron and Lira with the particular attention she gave things that interested her rather than things she felt she needed to monitor. At one point Lira made a point with characteristic bluntness and Isla looked at Zeron to see how he'd respond and the looking was easy. Direct. The kind of eye contact that didn't brace itself before it arrived.

She met my eyes across the table briefly when I looked at her.

She didn't look away first this time.

It was a small thing. The kind of thing that only registered because I'd been paying attention to the smallek things for long enough to know what the smaller things meant. When she first arrived she'd always looked away first. Then she'd started holding contact for a second longer before breaking it. Now she met my eyes and held them for a natural beat before moving on and there was nothing defensive in the motion at all

Vorak made no comment.

He didn't need to.

After breakfast she went to the sitting room with her phone and I went to my office and worked through the morning. Pryor came and went with his documents and Zeror stopped

in with a border update and Lira sent a written report about the eastern patrol schedule that was thorough enough to make me wish she'd agree to a more senior role when I raised it again at the end of the month.

At midday I passed the sitting room.

She was on the sofa with her legs drawn up and the phone in her hands and she was watching something, her face lit faintly by the screen. Her expression was relaxed in a way that still caught me slightly off guard when I saw it because relaxed wasn't what she'd looked like when I found her and the distance between those two things was one I wasn't yet fully accustomed to despite watching it close since she arrived.

She didn't look up but I saw her head tilt slightly toward the door.