

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

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A king arrives

(Caius) TWO DAYS LATER. ~~~~~ We left before the sun was fully up. I did not announce a departure time beyond what I had already told Pryor. My men knew the rule. You were at the gate when I was at the gate or you were not coming. All twelve were there when I arrived, horses ready, weapons checked, no one speaking more than they needed to. That was how I preferred it. A quiet unit was a focused one. Zeron fell into position beside me as we moved out through the Wraithbone gates and onto the road heading south. The morning was cold and the forest on either side of the road was thick and still. The kind of stillness that came before the world fully woke up. My horse moved at an easy pace and I let it settle there. Three hours to Ashcrest. There was no reason to push hard and arrive tired. "Tell me what you have on Rodan," I said. Zeron had been waiting for that. He always came prepared. "Three cancellations over five months," he said. "The first came six weeks after the council originally scheduled the visit. Rodan sent a message saying there was an active border dispute with the Dusksfang Pack to the west and that hosting a royal visit during an unsettled period would not be appropriate for Ashcrest at this time." "Reasonable on the surface," I said. "That is what I thought. Until I checked with Dusksfang. Their alpha said there had been no border dispute. A minor disagreement over hunting rights that was resolved in three days. Nothing that would have prevented a visit." I said nothing and let him continue. "The second cancellation came two months after that. Rodan cited his luna's health. Said she had taken ill and was not fit to receive guests of the king's standing. He sent a follow up a week later saying she had recovered but that the visit would need to be rescheduled." "And the third." "No reason given at all," Zeron said. "Just a message from his beta saying the timing was not right and that Alpha Rodan would reach out to confirm a new date. That was six weeks ago. No follow up came." A man who cancelled once had a reason. A man who cancelled twice was buying time. A man who cancelled three times, the last one without even bothering to invent an excuse, was a man who was afraid of what would be found when someone looked closely at his pack. I had dealt with enough alphas to know the difference between a busy man and a hiding one. Rodan was hiding something. "What do we know about the pack itself," I said. "Mid level by every measure. Around sixty members at last count. Warrior numbers are average for their size. No notable alliances and no enemies on record beyond the minor Dusksfang situation. Rodan has been alpha for fourteen years. No challenges to his position in that time." "No challenges in fourteen years in a mid level pack is not a sign of strength," I said. "It is a sign that no one strong enough stayed long enough to challenge." Zeron nodded. He knew what I meant. The best wolves in a stagnant pack did not stay. They found better options or they left and went rogue. What remained was a pack shaped entirely around the alpha's preferences, which meant if the alpha had bad habits they ran all the way through. We rode in silence for a while after that. The road wound deeper into the Appalachian forest, the trees closing in on both sides until the sky above was just a narrow strip of pale grey between the canopy. This part of the mountains was old. You could feel it. The kind of territory that had been wolf land for so long that even the trees seemed to know it. I had ridden this road twice before in the early years of my reign. Ashcrest had been unremarkable both times. A pack that kept its head down and paid its obligations and did nothing worth noticing in either direction. The kind of pack you forgot about until something reminded you it existed. Rodan had

now reminded me three times. That was three more than most alphas got. We crossed into Ashcrest territory a little past mid morning. There was no formal gate at their border, just a line of trees marked with the pack's boundary stones and two guards standing watch on either side of the road. The moment they saw us the change in them was immediate. One of them held his ground, though not comfortably. He stood up straighter in the way men do when they are trying to look like they are not afraid and not quite managing it. The other one took one look at me and turned and ran back through the trees toward the pack house. Running to warn Rodan we were coming. Good. I preferred a pack to know I was arriving before I arrived. It told me things. A pack that scrambled when they knew the king was coming was a pack with something to scramble about. The guard who had stayed gave a short bow as we reached him. "Alpha King," he said. "Alpha Rodan is expecting you. He asks that I convey his welcome and his apologies for not being at the border himself to receive you." "He can convey them himself when I get there," I said. I rode past him without waiting for a response. The pack land opened up as we came through the tree line. It was larger than I remembered, or perhaps it just looked that way because of how obviously it had been cleaned up. The training yard we passed on the left had been swept so recently that the marks of the broom were still visible in the dirt. The outer buildings looked freshly maintained. Woodwork that had probably been weathered and cracked for years had been patched up in a hurry, the new wood still pale against the old. A man who knew he was being visited by someone who would notice details did not clean like this unless he was trying to make sure those details were the only ones worth noticing. I was going to notice everything. Pack members had gathered near the main path, watching us come in. They stood in small groups and went quiet as we passed. I did not look at them directly. You learned things from people when they did not think you were watching. I caught faces that were too controlled. Expressions that were working to look normal instead of just being normal. The kind of group stillness that came not from calm but from everyone deciding at the same time to be very careful. Something was wrong in this pack. I had known it from Zeron's report and I was more certain of it now. The pack house stood at the center of the land. Large enough for a mid level pack. Solid construction. Nothing impressive and nothing falling apart. Rodan was waiting at the entrance. He was bigger than I remembered. Broad across the chest, well built for a man his age, with the kind of posture that said he was used to being the most powerful wolf in any room. He was not that today and his body knew it even if his face was working hard not to show it. He stepped forward and bowed. The right depth. Not too low to look desperate and not shallow enough to risk insult. A man who had rehearsed that bow. "Alpha King," he said. "Welcome to Ashcrest. We are honored by your presence." His voice was level. His eyes were not. I looked at him for a moment and then I looked past him at the pack house and then I looked back at him. "Rodan," I said. "If you and your men would like to come inside, Luna Maren has arranged refreshments." "Your men can see to mine," I said. "You and I will talk inside. Alone." Something moved behind his eyes. Fast and then gone. "Of course," he said. "Whatever the king wishes." I walked toward the entrance and he stepped aside to let me pass and I caught it again as I went by him. Wolfsbane. Not on him. Not on the pack house. Further away. At the edge of things. Faint enough that a wolf who was not looking for it would have missed it entirely. I was looking for it. I stepped inside and let Rodan close the door behind us and I filed the smell away and said nothing about it yet. There would be time.