

# The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

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## The scent in the air

(Caius) Rodan sat across from me and folded his hands on the table and began talking. That was what men like him did when they were afraid and trying not to show it. They talked. They filled the space with words and explanations and carefully arranged sentences that sounded reasonable on the surface and hoped that the volume of it would be enough to stop you from looking too closely at what was underneath. I let him talk. "I want to begin by apologizing for the delays in scheduling this visit," he said. "It has been a difficult few months for the pack and I should have communicated more clearly with your council about the reasons." "You should have," I said. He continued. The first postponement was the border dispute with the Dusksfang Pack. The second was Luna Maren's illness. The third, he said, was poor judgment on his part and he took full responsibility for it. He said the word responsibility the way men said it when they were hoping it would function as a door they could close behind themselves. I waited until he was done. "The Dusksfang dispute," I said. He stopped. "I spoke with their alpha," I said. "He told me the disagreement was over hunting rights. That it was resolved in three days." Something shifted behind Rodan's eyes. Small enough that most people would have missed it. I was not most people. "There were complications that extended beyond the initial resolution," he said. "Pack borders require monitoring even after formal agreements are reached." "For six weeks," I said. He did not answer that directly. He moved instead to telling me about Ashcrest's obligations to the crown, how they had always been met, how loyal the pack was, how committed he was to transparency with the king's court. It was well delivered. He had clearly prepared it. None of it addressed the question I had asked. I let him finish and then I looked at him across the table and said nothing. The silence did what silence always did. He held it for a few seconds and then he started talking again, this time about the rooms they had prepared for my warriors and whether the arrangements were satisfactory and whether I would like to eat before we discussed pack business further. "What is the wolfsbane for," I said. He stopped mid sentence. "I am sorry," he said. "Wolfsbane." "I can smell it," I said. "It is not coming from your border lines. It is concentrated. Contained. Coming from the far edge of your land to the east. Not from your cells either. Further than that." His hands on the table did not move. I gave him credit for that. Most men's hands moved when they were caught off guard. "We have had some rogue activity near the eastern tree line," he said. "We laid additional wolfsbane as a precaution in that area." "Rogues do not require concentrated wolfsbane in a fixed location," I said. "Border lines are spread out. What you are describing would cover a perimeter. What I am smelling covers a point." Rodan looked at me. I looked back at him. He was a capable alpha and he had spent fourteen years commanding a pack and neither of those things was helping him right now and he knew it. "I can have Drace, my beta, explain the specifics of our border security measures in more detail if that would help," he said. "He oversees that area directly and would be better placed than I am to answer your questions about the precise layout." It was a deflection and we both knew it. Bringing in his beta would slow the conversation down, add another person to manage, create more time to think. I had used the same tactic myself on the

two occasions in eight years that someone had managed to ask me something I needed a moment to consider. "That will not be necessary," I said. He nodded and said nothing. I looked past him at the window on the far wall. The pack grounds were visible from here, the training yard to the left, the outer buildings along the tree line, and beyond them the further reaches of the land that I could not see from this angle. The wolfsbane smell was coming from that direction. Faint inside the pack house but there. Present enough that it had been there long enough to settle into the air. Something was being kept out there. Something that required a fixed point of wolfsbane strong enough to still be detectable from inside the main building. I turned back to Rodan. "I will be walking the full grounds before we leave today," I said. The change in him was not dramatic. He did not move and he made no sound. But the careful composure he had maintained from the moment I rode through his gates cracked, right at the edges, just for a second. His eyes moved, not much, just enough, in the direction of the far eastern grounds, and then they came back to my face and he pulled himself together. It was a small thing. It was also everything. "Of course," he said. "Whatever the king requires. I would be glad to walk the grounds with you personally and." "I prefer to inspect alone," I said. He did not like that. A guided inspection gave him some measure of control over what I saw and when. Walking alone gave him nothing. I watched him accept that there was no way to argue with it that would not make things worse for him and settle into the acceptance the way a man settles into something uncomfortable because the alternative is worse. "Naturally," he said. "The grounds are yours to walk at any time." I nodded and looked at the tray of food Maren had left on the table and did not touch it and looked back at Rodan. "Tell me about your pack numbers," I said. "Warriors, training rotations, current patrol structure." He was relieved to have something ordinary to answer. I heard it in the way his voice settled and his posture loosened by a fraction. He started talking about numbers and schedules and I listened and I nodded and I asked questions that needed longer answers and I let him fill the room with words again. And while he talked I kept the wolfsbane smell at the back of my mind, tracking its direction, its strength, what it told me about how long it had been there and how concentrated it was at its source. Whatever was at the far edge of this pack's land had been there a long time. I was going to find it.