

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

chapter 1

The coming storm

(Isla) The c***k of the whip split the morning air and I bit down hard on my lip to stop myself from crying out. I had learned not to cry out. Crying out made it last longer. "Again," Alpha Rodan said. The whip came down across my back and I pressed my forehead against the ground and held on. The dirt was cold beneath my palms. My fingers curled into it, gripping it like it was the only thing keeping me here. Around me I could hear the pack gathered and watching. Nobody spoke. Nobody moved. They never did. It had started because I dropped a plate. That was all. A simple ceramic plate that had slipped from my hands while I was carrying a stack of dishes from the kitchen to the pack house dining table. It had hit the floor and cracked clean in two and Alpha Rodan had gone very still in that way he did before something bad happened. The room had gone quiet around him. He had looked at me for a long moment and then told Drace, his beta, to bring the whip. That was twenty minutes ago. I had stopped counting the strikes after the eighth one. "You are worthless," Rodan said, walking slowly around me. His voice was level, almost calm, which was the most frightening thing about him. He never shouted. He never needed to. "A wolfless creature who cannot even carry dishes without destroying things. What exactly are you good for, Isla?" I said nothing. Answering was not something he wanted. It was something he punished. The whip came down again and this time I could not hold it in. A sound tore out of me, small and broken, and I pressed my face harder into the dirt and tried to breathe through it. "Get her up," Rodan said. Two pack members pulled me to my feet. My back was on fire. I could feel where the skin had broken, warm and wet against the thin fabric of my shirt. I kept my eyes down. Always eyes down. Luna Maren stood a few feet away with her arms crossed, watching me the way someone watches something mildly interesting. There was no feeling in her face. There never was when it came to me. "Clean up the mess you made," she said. "And if I find one shard of that plate on my floor after you are done, you will be back out here before sundown." She turned and walked back inside. The pack followed. Rodan looked at me once more, the way you look at something you have already forgotten, and then he was gone too. I stood in the yard alone and let myself breathe for just a moment. My name is Isla Thorne. And in the Ashcrest Pack, that name meant less than nothing. Every pack member who walked these grounds had a bed, a room, a place inside the pack house. Even the lowest ranked wolves had four solid walls and a roof that did not let the rain in. I had none of that. I lived in a shack at the far edge of the pack's land, so far from everything else that on dark nights I could not see a single light from where I slept. The walls were rotting wood, split in places wide enough to push a hand through. The roof had a hole in the far corner that I had stuffed with old cloth, but when the rain was heavy it came through anyway and soaked the dirt floor and the thin blanket I slept on. There was no bed. No window. No furniture of any kind. Just the floor and the chain and the dark. The chain around my ankle was laced with wolfsbane. I had found that out the hard way in the beginning when I grabbed it with both hands and my palms had blistered within seconds. I could not touch it. Could not remove it. All I could do was live with the burn of it against my skin which never stopped, not even at night when I was trying to sleep. I had no wolf. But I was still a werewolf by blood and that was enough for the wolfsbane to work on me. Not the way it would on a fully shifted wolf, but enough. It burned where the chain met my skin and it sat inside my body like a weight that never lifted, making my legs heavier than they should have been, keeping my head foggy and my body slower than it had any right to be. It was not enough to keep me on the ground but it was enough to make sure I could never get far. Every morning a guard named Torvin came to unlock it so I could begin my work. Every night he came

back to lock it again. He wore thick lined gloves to protect himself from the wolfsbane and he never once looked at me like I was a person. I had thought about running in the early years. But between the wolfsbane and the starvation and the lack of water my body simply did not have enough in it to carry me far enough to matter. And if they caught me, and they would catch me, what waited on the other side of that was something I could not let myself think about. So I stayed. I had been staying for five years. I made myself walk back inside the pack house and found the broken plate on the dining room floor where I had left it. I crouched down and picked up the pieces one by one, careful not to cut myself, though I was not sure it would have mattered much to anyone if I did. When the floor was clean I stood up and looked at the work still left in front of me. The dishes still needed to be laid out. The kitchen still needed to be cleaned from breakfast preparation. After that I had the pack house floors to scrub and the training yard to sweep before anyone came to use it in the afternoon. My back burned with every movement. I kept going anyway. My father, Derek Thorne, was a high ranking warrior under Rodan. Respected, known across neighboring packs, a man other wolves looked up to. He had four children. Vera, his favorite. Cole and Brent, his pride. And then me, the one he never mentioned, the one he looked through when others were around like I was made of air. A wolfless child was the worst kind of shame for a warrior. He had never forgiven me for it. My mother Helene is no different. She had a look she saved only for me, not anger, just nothing. A blank emptiness that said I was not worth the effort of a real feeling. That blankness was harder to take than the hitting most days. Brent was twenty one and had our father's temper without any of his restraint. He hit me because he wanted to, because he could, because nobody in this pack would ever tell him to stop. Cole left me alone mostly. Vera watched and said nothing and looked away. I was not allowed to eat until the pack and my family had finished their meals. By then there was rarely anything left. I had been hungry for so long that the feeling had become part of me, a constant dull ache I carried everywhere. I was thin in a way that made my arms look fragile. The only water I had was from the barrel outside my shack and most days it was not enough. I moved through the pack house quietly, the way I always did, trying to take up as little space as possible. It was safer that way. The less they noticed me the better, because when they noticed me they always found a reason. By the time I finished the floors my back had gone from burning to a deep, constant pain that made it hard to stand straight. I straightened anyway. Slouching got me hit too. I stepped outside to start on the training yard and stopped for just a second, tipping my face up toward the sky. The sun was fully up now. It was going to be a long day. My mother had mentioned last week that the Alpha King was coming to Ashcrest soon. The whole pack had been in a state about it since, cleaning and preparing and making sure everything looked right. Alpha Rodan had been in a worse mood than usual, which meant I had been paying for it more than usual. I did not know much about the Alpha King except what I had heard in pieces over the years. That he was ruthless. That packs surrendered rather than fight him. That men who stood against him did not stand for long. I did not think about him beyond that. I had enough to survive without borrowing more fear from somewhere else. I pressed one hand against my middle where the hunger was worst and told myself what I always told myself when everything hurt and the day stretched out long and empty ahead of me. Just get through today. It was all I had ever had. It was enough. It had to be.