The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 11

The chain breaks–1

(Caius)

Zeron appeared in the doorway within seconds.

He'd been close. I'd known he would be. Eight years of working together had taught him to stay within earshot when I went somewhere alone on uncertain ground and he'd never once needed me to explain that expectation to him. He was simply always there when I needed him to be.

He stepped into the shack and stopped.

I watched his face in the moment he took in what was in front of him. Zeron wasn't a man whose expression changed easily. I'd seen him receive news of battles, deaths, border crises, and pack emergencies without his face doing anything more than tightening slightly at the corners. It was one of the things that made him good at his job.

His face changed now.

He looked at the girl in the corner and then he looked at the chain on her ankle and then he looked at me and I could see him working to put his expression back where it belonged and not quite getting there all the way.

I didn't look at him for long. My attention kept going back to her the way a compass needle went back to north, without choice, without asking permission, simply because that was what it was built to do. She hadn't moved since she told me five years. She was still in the corner with her back against the wall and her eyes moving between me and Zeron with the careful watchful look of someone calculating which direction the next thing was going to come from.

I crouched down in front of the chain.

It was bolted to a ring in the floor, the ring itself driven deep into the packed dirt and set at some point with enough force that it hadn't moved since. The chain ran from the ring to a cuff around her ankle, the cuff closed with a lock that wasn't complicated but was solid, the kind that needed a key or the right tool to open cleanly. The metal was dark with wolfsbane residue, worked into the links themselves, not just surface contact but embedded in the material so that every hour she wore it she was in contact with it.

I reached for it.

The burn hit my fingers the moment I made contact, immediate and real, running up through my hand and into my wrist. I could push through it. That wasn't the question. I'd pushed through worse than wolfsbane burns and my tolerance as Alpha King was higher than most, high enough that I could hold on far longer than the average wolf before the damage became something I couldn't ignore.

The question was the lock.

I could break the chain. Given enough force and enough tolerance for the pain of holding it, I could find a weak link and break it. But breaking it meant the chain would snap back and the cuff would still be on her

The chain breakes 1 ankle and the cuff was the part sitting directly against the burned skin. Done wrong it could drive the metal harder into the wound before she was free of it arid ! wasn't going to do that to her.

I let go and straightened up.

Claim

"I need something to break that lock," I said to Zeron. "Something that won't require bare hand contact with the chain. Find it."

Zeron nodded once and was gone before I finished the sentence.

I turned back to the girl.

She'd watched me touch the chain and pull back and I could see her trying to work out what that meant.

Whether I was going to leave. Whether Zeron leaving meant something bad was coming. Her eyes went to the open doorway and then back to me and I could see the calculation in them, the constant running assessment of every variable in the room that was the habit of someone who'd learned to survive by reading situations before they developed.

"He's coming back," I said. "He's getting something to take that off without making it worse."

She looked at me. She didn't say anything.

"What's your name?" I said.

A pause. Short but there.

"Isla," she said.

Her voice was the same as before. Small and rough and careful, the voice of someone who'd learned to take up as little space as possible even with sound.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 12

The chain breaks–2

"Isla," I said.

I said it once and didn't say anything after it. I wasn't going to make promises to her right now. Promises made in the first five minutes by a stranger who'd walked into her shack weren't going to mean anything to a girl who'd lived in this room for five years. Words were cheap and she'd know that better than most. What I could do was stay where I was and not move toward her and not raise my voice and let her see that nothing bad was coming from my direction.

Vorak, my wolf, wasn't making that easy.

He'd been screaming since the moment the bond hit me in the doorway and he hadn't stopped. Not the way he screamed before a fight, that was a focused and directed thing. This was different. This was something without a clear target, a reaction to what he was seeing and smelling and understanding about this room and the girl in it and how long she'd been here and what that had cost her, and the only direction I could point him in right now was at Rodan and his pack and I needed to keep that contained until I had

Isla out of here.

I looked at the ring in the floor. The bolt was deep. Someone had put real effort into making sure it couldn't be pulled loose. I thought about who had crouched down in this same spot and driven that bolt in and made sure it would hold and I filed that thought away in the part of my mind where I was keeping everything I was going to come back to when the time was right.

Zeron came back through the door with two of my warriors behind him. One of them was carrying a heavy bolt cutter from the saddlebag kit we traveled with, the kind used for cutting through chain link in border situations. The other had thick leather work gloves, the kind that were lined and reinforced, not perfect protection against wolfsbane contact but enough to handle the chain without immediate damage.

"The lock first," I said. "Not the chain. Get the cuff off her ankle as cleanly as you can."

Zeron pulled the gloves on and crouched in front of Isla. He looked up at her before he touched anything.

“I’m going to get this off you,” he said. His voice was different from the one he used with me. Quieter. More careful. “I’m going to be as careful as I can. Tell me if I need to stop.”

She looked at him. Something in her face moved at being spoken to that way. There and gone quickly, the way things moved across her face when she was trying not to show them.

She gave a small nod.

Zeron positioned the bolt cutter against the lock and looked up at me once. I nodded. He pressed down and the lock gave with a sound that was much smaller than the size of the thing that’d been keeping her in place deserved.

The cuff came open.

Zeron eased it away from her ankle carefully and set it on the floor and the chain went with it, the whole

The chain breaks–2

Claim length of it going slack against the dirt, and for the first time in five years the ring in the floor had nothing attached to it.

I looked at Isla’s ankle where the cuff had been. The skin was raw and burned in a ring that told me exactly how long and how consistently that contact had been maintained.

Vorak went very quiet in a way that wasn’t calm.

I looked at Zeron.

“Go and find Rodan,” I said. “Tell him to gather his pack in the yard. Everyone. Now.”

Zeron stood, read my face, and left without a word.

I looked back at Isla.

She was looking at her own ankle. At the place where the chain had been. Her expression was something I couldn’t fully read but I understood enough of it to know that she hadn’t yet decided what the absence of it meant.

“Can you stand?” I said.

She looked up at me.

Then she tried.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 13

Let them see

(Isla)

Standing up was harder than it should've been.

Not because of my ankle. I walked on that every day, had been walking on it for five years through the burn and the soreness, and today was no different from any other day in that regard. It was my legs that weren't cooperating, stiff from sitting in the same position on the cold floor for hours. I got halfway up and my left leg buckled and I had to catch myself against the wall with one hand to keep from going back down.

I didn't look at him while it was happening. I didn't want to see his face.

I got my feet under me properly on the second try and straightened up and stood. My ankle where the chain had been felt strange. Not better exactly, the burn was still there the way it always was, but the weight of the cuff was gone and the absence of it felt so unfamiliar that my body kept expecting to feel it and not finding it. Five years of that weight and now nothing. I didn't know what to do with nothing.

I stood against the wall and looked at the man across the room.

He hadn't moved since the other man left. He was still a few feet inside the door with his arms at his sides and his eyes on me and that expression on his face that I still couldn't name. He was watching me stand up the way you watched something you were being careful with. Not with pity. Not with the kind of look I was used to getting when I was struggling with something in front of people who enjoyed seeing it. Something else. Something I didn't have a word for.

I didn't know what he wanted.

That was the part that was making it hard to think clearly. Every person who'd ever come into this shack had wanted something specific and I'd always been able to work out what it was within the first few seconds. Rodan wanted obedience and fear. Maren wanted humiliation. Torvin wanted to do his job and leave. My father wanted to pretend I wasn't there even while he was standing in front of me.

This man had taken the chain off. The other man was gone. He was standing in my shack in the middle of a visit that had nothing to do with me and he was looking at me like I was the only thing in the room worth looking at and I couldn't work out what any of it meant.

I pressed my back against the wall. Old habit. I knew I was doing it. I did it anyway. Some habits were too deep to stop before they started.

“You don’t need to do that,” he said.

His voice was the same as before. Quiet and controlled and somehow heavier than voices that were loud.

I looked at him.

“The wall,” he said. “You don’t need to press against it.”

I made myself stop, made myself stand with my back just touching the wood instead of pushed into it,

Let them see-

and it took more conscious effort than it should’ve.

He noticed. I could tell he noticed but he didn’t say anything else about it.

He looked at me for a long moment and then he said, “I’m going to carry you across the grounds.”

I went still.

Claim

“There are sixty pack members out there,” he said. “I want them to see you when we come out of this shack. I want them to see exactly how I found you and I want them to understand what that means.” He paused. “I’m not going to touch you without your permission. But I’m asking.”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

Nobody had asked me for permission to do anything in five years. The concept of it sat in front of me and I turned it over and couldn’t quite find the edges of it. He was asking. He was standing in my shack with the chain on the floor between us and he was asking me whether he could carry me and waiting for my answer like it actually mattered what I said.

I looked at the door. At the strip of daylight visible through the gap at the bottom. Beyond that door was the pack house and the training yard and every wolf who’d watched me be whipped and said nothing. My father. Brent. Vera. Maren in her clean clothes with her hands folded.

He wanted them to see me.

I didn't fully understand yet what he meant by that or what it was going to look like but something in the way he'd said it made me think that whatever was about to happen outside that door was going to be different from everything that had come before it.

"Alright," I said.

He crossed the room toward me and I made myself stay still and not press back into the wall again. He was very large up close, larger than he'd seemed from across the room, and the instinct to make myself smaller was so deep and so automatic that fighting it required actual effort.

He stopped in front of me and crouched down and looked at my ankle the way someone looked at something they were assessing rather than something they were judging. His expression while he looked at it was the same controlled thing it'd been since the doorway but something around his eyes was different from when he'd first walked in. Tighter. Like something was sitting behind them that he was choosing not to show.

He straightened back up.

"Put your arms around my neck if you need to," he said. "Or don't. Whatever you're comfortable with."

Then he picked me up.

It was careful and it was considered and at no point did it feel the way being grabbed had always felt, sudden and without warning, designed to remind you that you were smaller and weaker and that the other person could do whatever they wanted. This was different. I felt him adjust his hold when I went rigid and

Let them see give me a second before he moved and by the time he turned toward the door I was breathing again.

Claim

I didn't put my arms around his neck. I held myself as still as could and looked straight ahead at the door as he carried me through it and out into the daylight.

The cold air hit me first. Then the light, brighter out here than in the shack, and I blinked against it and when my eyes adjusted I saw the pack

They were in the yard. All of them. Standing in the open space between the pack house and the outer buildings and every single face was turned toward us.

My father was in the third row. I found him without looking for him, the way you found things you'd been both dreading and bracing for your whole life. He was looking at me the way he always looked at me, like I was a problem he didn't know how to solve, except that today there was something else in it that I hadn't seen there before.

I looked at him and I didn't look away.

For the first time in my life I didn't look away first.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 14

The coming judgement–1

(Caius)

Claim

She was lighter than she should've been.

That was the first thing I registered when I picked her up, not as an observation but as something that landed in my chest and stayed there. I'd carried injured warriors off battlefields. I knew what a body felt like when it had been properly fed and kept and maintained the way a living thing was supposed to be maintained. Isla didn't feel like that. She felt like someone had been taking from her for so long that what was left was only the parts that couldn't be removed.

She'd gone rigid the moment I touched her. Not surprising. I'd expected it and I'd given her a second before I moved, let her feel that I wasn't going to grip harder or shift my hold without warning, and by the time I turned toward the door some of the rigidity had eased. Not all of it. Enough.

I carried her through the door and out into the daylight.

The pack was in the yard the way Zeron had arranged them, all sixty members standing in the open ground between the pack house and the outer buildings. The silence when they saw us was immediate and total. I walked out of the tree line carrying a girl that half of them had clearly seen before and the other half had clearly been told not to look at and every single face went still in a different way.

I didn't look at them yet.

I was looking at Isla.

Up close, in full daylight, she was worse than she'd been in the dim light of the shack. The bruising along her left cheekbone was four days old at least, yellowing at the edges the way deep bruising did when it was starting to fade, which meant there had been something bad enough to leave a mark like that within the past week. Her wrists were thin in a way that made the bones visible when she moved. The tear in the back of her shirt had shown me the marks on her back when she'd been in the corner and out here in the light I could see the edges of them above her collar. Old ones, raised and faded. New ones, not fully closed.

I kept my face where it needed to be.

That was the work of it right now. Keeping everything I was feeling in the place where it belonged, in the part of me that was going to deal with this pack before I left this territory, not in the part of me that was carrying this girl across the grounds right now. She didn't need my anger. She needed my control.

Vorak was making the control harder than it had ever been.

I walked across the grounds toward the pack house and the sixty wolves in the yard watched every step and nobody made a sound and I let them look. I wanted them to look. I wanted every single one of them to understand what they were seeing, who this girl was, what had been done to her, and what the fact that

I was the one carrying her meant for all of them.

The coming jungement!

Claim

Rodan was standing at the front of the assembled pack. He'd come out of the pack house when Zeron gave the order and he was standing with his hands at his sides and his face arranged in an expression that was trying very hard to be composed and not quite getting there. His eyes went to Isla when I came through the tree line and something moved in them that he couldn't fully control.

Good. He should feel that.

I stopped in the middle of the yard.

I looked down at Isla. She was looking straight ahead, not at Rodan, not at the pack, at some fixed point in the middle distance that I understood was her way of getting through this moment without falling apart. I recognized the technique. I'd used a version of it myself in situations that required more from me than I had available.

"Who did this?" I said.

I kept my voice low. Not for the pack's benefit. For hers. She was already carrying enough without me adding the weight of a raised voice directed at her.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 15

The coming judgement–2

She didn't answer.

I waited.

She kept her eyes on that fixed point and her body was very still in my arms and she didn't say a word.

Claim

I didn't push. I'd asked once and she'd heard me and whatever was stopping her from answering was something I was going to understand better when I knew more about how this pack worked and what the consequences of speaking had cost her in the past. A girl who'd spent five years in that shack had learned that words had prices. I wasn't going to make her pay one she hadn't agreed to yet.

I looked back at Rodan.

He was watching me with the expression of a man who had run every calculation available to him and found that none of them led anywhere good.

I shifted my hold slightly to look at Isla's ankle properly in the daylight. The burn was a complete ring around the bone, the skin raw and damaged in layers that told me this had been consistent and long term, not a recent thing, not an accident. The innermost layer was the oldest damage, healed over and over and damaged again so many times that the skin there had a texture that permanent wolfsbane contact left behind. Around that were newer layers. The most recent was still red and open in places where the cuff had sat against it, damaged again and again over the same skin until it had no chance to properly heal.

Something settled into my chest that wasn't anger exactly. Anger was something that moved, that wanted to go somewhere, that pushed outward. This was different. This was something that sat down and got very still and very cold and very certain, the way I felt in the moment before a fight when everything simplified down to what needed to happen next.

I looked at Rodan.

He looked back at me and I watched him understand that I'd looked at the ankle. That I'd seen what I'd seen. That the calculation had changed.

"Alpha King," he started.

"Not yet," I said.

He stopped.

I looked back at Isla. Her eyes had come back from that fixed point and were on my face now, reading me the way she read everything, carefully and quickly and with the particular attention of someone who'd learned that missing a detail could cost them.

I kept my face where it was. Controlled and even. Not for him. For her.

"I'm going to set you down," I said to her quietly. "Can you stand?"

The coming ongement 2 She nodded.

Claim

1 set her down carefully and kept one hand near her arm without touching it in case she needed it. She found her feet and straightened and stood, and the pack watched a girl they'd spent years treating like she was nothing stand up in the middle of their yard and not one of them made a sound.

I stepped back and turned to face Rodan fully.

The yard was silent. The kind of silence that had weight to it, that pressed down on everything underneath

"How long," I said.

It wasn't a question. Not really. I already knew the answer. Five years in the shack and the ankle told me the chain had been there for most of it. But I wanted him to say it in front of his pack, in front of his luna, in front of his warriors who'd stood by and watched and said nothing.

I wanted him to say it out loud.

Rodan opened his mouth.

"How long," I said again, and this time something came through in my voice that I didn't try to stop, something that had been sitting behind my control since the moment I pushed open that shack door, and every wolf in the yard took a step back without meaning to.

Every wolf except Isla.

She stood where she was.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 16

The man who stopped it–1

(Isla)

I heard it before I fully understood what I was seeing.

The sound of Rodan going through the wall was not what I expected. I'd heard Rodan hit things before. I'd been on the receiving end of it enough times to know what force sounded like when it landed. But this was different. This was the sound of the wall itself giving way, wood splintering and cracking and then the thud of a body hitting the floor on the other side, and then silence.

Complete silence.

I stood where the man had set me down and I looked at the hole in the wall of the pack house and I waited for my brain to catch up to what my eyes had just seen.

Rodan was on the other side of that wall.

Alpha Rodan. The man who had ordered my chain. Who had stood in that yard and watched me be whipped and kept his hands folded behind his back and his face arranged in that particular expression of calm satisfaction that I had spent twenty years learning to read and fear. The man whose voice alone had been enough to make every wolf in this pack fall in line including my father, including warriors twice his age, including people who should have known better and chose not to.

He was on the floor.

The man standing in the yard with dust from the broken wall still in the air around him had put him there in one move. One. And he wasn't even breathing hard.

I became aware that I wasn't breathing at all.

I made myself breathe. In and out. The cold air came in and I let it settle and I kept my eyes on the hole in the wall and on the man standing in front of it with his back to me, looking at what he'd done without any particular expression that I could see from here.

Then he turned and looked at the rest of the yard.

Not at me. At them.

I turned too, because I couldn't help it, because something in the way he turned made me need to see what he was seeing.

The pack was frozen. Every single wolf in that yard was completely still in a way that went beyond the normal stillness of shock. This was the stillness of sixty wolves whose instincts had all arrived at the same conclusion at the same time and that conclusion was do not move, do not speak, do not draw his attention in any way.

My father was in the third row.

The man who stopped !! !

Claim found him the way I always found him, without meaning to, without wanting to. He was standing with his arms at his sides and his face had the look it got when something had happened that he hadn't prepared for and didn't know how to respond to. He was looking at the hole in the wall. Not at me. At the hole in the wall where his alpha had just gone through.

I watched him and I waited for something. I didn't know what. Some reaction that told me this had landed on him the way it should've, that he understood what it meant, that the man who had chained his daughter to a floor for five years was on that floor now and that was connected to something Derek Thorne should feel.

His face gave me nothing.

I looked at Brent.

Brent was three people to my father's left and he was doing something I'd never seen him do before in my life. He was making himself small. Brent, who had tripped me in front of the table and laughed. Brent, who had found a hundred small ways over twenty years to remind me that I was below him and always would be. He was standing with his chin down and his eyes forward and he wasn't looking at me and he wasn't looking at the wall and he wasn't doing anything that might cause the man standing in this yard to notice him.

Something moved in my chest at that.

Not satisfaction exactly. Something quieter. The particular feeling of watching a person who has spent years making themselves large in your presence suddenly understand that the world is bigger than they thought it was and they are not actually the size they believed themselves to be.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 17

The man who stopped it–2

I looked at Maren.

Claim

She was at the front of the pack where Rodan had been standing and her face had gone a color I hadn't seen on it before. Not the pale of shock. Something deeper. The color of a person who has just understood that the thing they thought was protecting them is gone and there is nothing between them and what comes next.

She was looking at the man in the yard.

Not at me. She hadn't looked at me once since he carried me out of that shack. I didn't know what that meant yet but I filed it away the way I filed everything, carefully, for later.

I looked back at the hole in the wall.

I'd been in this pack for twenty years. I'd been in it from the day I was born and for the first fourteen years of it I'd been a person with a family and a place in things, not a good place, not a warm one, but a place. I'd eaten at the table and slept in the house and done what I was told and hoped that if I was good enough and small enough and quiet enough the thing I could feel building around me would not arrive.

It had arrived anyway. On my fifteenth birthday when I didn't shift and Rodan made his decision and my father agreed to it and my mother said nothing and I went from being a person with a bad place in things to being something the pack kept at the edge of their land and used and forgot about.

Twenty years.

I'd spent twenty years waiting for someone in this pack to say enough. Not to me. About me. On my behalf. I'd stopped believing it would happen somewhere around year three in the shack. I'd made my peace with it the way you made peace with things that were never going to change. You accepted it and you stopped looking for it and you put your energy into surviving instead of hoping.

And then this man had walked through my door.

He hadn’t known me. Hadn’t known my name or my story or what had been done to me. He’d walked into that shack and seen the chain and done the calculation in about thirty seconds and made a decision that nobody in this pack had been willing to make in five years. He’d taken the chain off. He’d carried me out. And when Rodan opened his mouth to explain it away he’d listened for exactly as long as it took him to decide he’d heard enough.

One move.

Five years of that chain and one move.

I was aware that I was shaking. Not from cold. My hands were completely still at my sides but somewhere deeper than my hands there was something that had been held very tightly for a very long time and was not quite sure what to do now that the thing it had been braced against was gone.

The man who stopped !!–2

The marrturned back from looking at the pack and his eyes found mine.

I didn’t look away.

Claim

He looked at me for a moment with that expression I still couldn’t fully read and then he said something to the large man who had appeared beside him, too quiet for me to hear, and the large man nodded and started moving toward me.

And the man himself turned back toward the hole in the wall.

He wasn’t finished.

I understood that. Whatever had just happened in this yard was not the end of it. It was the beginning of something and I was standing in the middle of it and I had absolutely no idea what came next. Not knowing what came next had always meant danger. Right now it didn’t feel like danger at all. I didn’t know what to call what it felt like instead.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 18

The King’s order–1

(Caius)

Rodan was on the floor inside the pack house.

Claim

I stepped through the hole in the wall and stood over him and looked down at him and let him look back at me. He was conscious. His face was cut from the wood that had given way when he went through it and he was holding his side where he'd hit the floor but he was conscious and he could hear me and that was what mattered right now.

"Get up," I said.

He moved. Not quickly. He got one hand under himself and pushed and made it to his knees and then the rest of the way up, and he stood in front of me with blood on his face and something in his expression that had not been there in the yard before I hit him. The composure was gone. What was left underneath it was what I'd suspected was there all along.

Fear. Real fear. The kind that didn't have a performance built around it.

Good.

"Come with me," I said.

I walked back through the hole into the yard and he followed and I didn't check whether he was keeping up because the alternative to keeping up was something he wasn't going to choose right now. The yard was exactly as I'd left it. Every wolf still in their place, still not moving, still not making a sound. Sixty pairs of eyes on us as we came back through the wall.

I stopped in the center of the yard and turned to face the pack.

I didn't raise my voice. I never needed to.

"Listen carefully," I said. "Because I'm going to say this once."

The yard was already silent. It got more silent. I hadn't thought that was possible but it was.

"Nobody leaves this territory," I said. "Not today. Not tomorrow. Not until I give the order that says otherwise. If anyone attempts to cross that border they'll be brought back and added to my list of people I want to speak to. If anyone passes information about this pack or about my presence here to anyone outside this territory the consequences will be severe." I looked at the faces in front of me. "Do you understand me?"

Nobody spoke. Nobody needed to. The understanding was in every face.

“My warriors will be positioned at every border point before nightfall,” I said. “Your own border guards will stand down and my men will take over. This is not a request.”

I looked at Rodan’s beta, Drace, who was standing near the front of the pack with an expression that was

The King’sarder 1 trying very hard to be neutral and not managing it.

“You,” I said.

He straightened.

“I want every member of this pack’s hierarchy in the pack house in one hour. Alpha, luna, beta, gamma, delta. Everyone who holds rank in this pack sits in that roorn in one hour.”

Drace nodded quickly.

I looked back at the general pack.

Claim

“The rest of you go about your day,” I said. “Don’t discuss what you’ve seen this morning with each other. Don’t leave the territory. Don’t do anything that gives me a reason to add your name to my list.” I paused.

“Dismissed.”

They moved. Not in the loose way a pack moved when a normal day was resuming. They moved carefully, quietly, in the way people moved when they were very aware of being watched and very motivated to give no cause for concern. Within two minutes the yard had cleared and it was just me and Rodan and Zeron and my twelve warriors positioned around the grounds.

I turned to Rodan.

He was standing where he’d followed me to, a few feet to my right, and he was very still. The blood on his face had started to dry at the edges. He hadn’t wiped it. I didn’t think he’d wanted to make any unnecessary movements.

“Walk with me,” I said.

I didn’t wait for his response. I started walking toward the far end of the grounds, away from the pack house, away from the remaining wolves near the outer buildings, toward the open training yard where there was nobody within earshot. I heard his footsteps behind me and I kept walking until I reached the center of the training yard and stopped and turned.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 19

Call it what it is–1

(Isla)

The large man, the one the dark haired man had sent toward me in the yard, had brought me inside the pack house.

Not through the hole in the wall. Through the front door, the one I'd used hundreds of times carrying trays and buckets and whatever else the pack needed moved from one place to another. I'd always entered through the back before. The kitchen door. The service entrance. The way you came in when you were not a person the front door was meant for.

He'd walked me through the front door without a word about it and I hadn't known what to do with that so

I'd done nothing and just walked through it.

He'd settled me in a chair in the main room off the hall, the same room where I'd served meals and cleaned floors and kept my eyes down for five years, and he'd told me to stay there and that someone would come to see to my ankle and he'd positioned himself near the door in a way that made it clear he was staying too.

I sat in the chair and looked at the room.

I'd never sat in this room before. I'd stood in it. I'd knelt in it. I'd been on my hands and knees on that floor more times than I could count. But I'd never sat in one of the chairs that lined the walls and looked at the room from the level everyone else got to look at it from.

It was smaller than it seemed when you were on the floor.

I heard them before they came in. Maren's footsteps were as familiar to me as Torvin's, though for different reasons. Where Torvin's footsteps had meant the start and end of each day, Maren's had meant something was coming that I needed to be ready for. Quick footsteps meant she was in a mood that had found a direction. Today her footsteps were quick and there was a second set behind them that I recognized as Drace, and behind him Hadoc and Dolin.

They came into the room and Maren saw me in the chair and something moved across her face before she got it back under control. She looked at me sitting in that chair the way

she looked at everything that hadn't been given permission to exist in the place where it was existing.

She didn't say anything to me. She turned to the large man near the door.

"Where is the king?" she said.

"He'll be here shortly," he said.

Maren folded her hands in front of her. That was her composure position. Hands folded, back straight, chin level. I'd seen it a thousand times. It meant she'd decided on an approach and was ready to deliver it.

He came in ten minutes later.

Call it what it is 7-

Claim

He walked into the room and looked at me first. Just for a second. Then he looked at Maren and Drace and Hadloc and Dolin and the other pack hierarchy members who had filed in and taken their places, and he sat down at the head of the table and looked at all of them and said nothing.

The silence stretched.

Maren broke it.

That didn't surprise me. Maren had never been good at silence when she had something prepared to say.

Silence meant someone else might speak first and shape the conversation before she could and that was not something she allowed if she could help it.

"Alpha King," she said. "I want to address what happened this morning because I think there are important factors that haven't been considered and I believe the king deserves the full picture before any conclusions are drawn."

He looked at her. He didn't speak.

Maren took that as permission to continue, which I could've told her was a mistake if anyone had thought to ask me.

"Isla Thorne was born into a warrior family in this pack," she said. "Her father has served Ashcrest loyally for over two decades. When it became clear on her fifteenth birthday that she hadn't shifted and showed no signs of shifting, the pack faced a genuine challenge. A

wolfless member in a warrior family isn't simply an inconvenience. It affects pack dynamics, pack morale, and the standing of the family involved."

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 20

Call it what it is–2

I looked at my hands in my lap.

I'd heard this before. Not directed at someone who could do something about it, but I'd heard the shape of rather than a person the pack had failed.

"The decision to house her separately was not made lightly," Maren continued. "It was a collective decision made with the pack's best interests in mind. The wolfsbane was a precautionary measure recommended by our healer at the time given her unpredictable behavior in the early period. The separation was meant to be temporary while a longer term solution was discussed."

I looked up at that.

Unpredictable behavior. I'd been fifteen years old and I'd cried for three days when they first chained me and tried once to pull the ring from the floor. That was the unpredictable behavior. That was what had warranted a wolfsbane chain.

He was still looking at Maren. His face hadn't changed. He hadn't moved or made a sound and Maren was reading that stillness as patience, as an invitation to keep going, and I could see from where I was sitting that it wasn't either of those things.

"Over time the temporary arrangement became the established one," Maren said. "Not out of cruelty but out of practicality. The pack had found a structure that worked and changing it required a conversation that kept being deferred. I want the king to understand that nobody in this pack woke up each morning and chose to make Isla's life difficult. These were institutional decisions made over a long period by multiple people and."

"Stop," he said.

Maren stopped.

The word had not been loud. It had not been sharp or sudden. It had come out the same way everything he said came out, controlled and even and with a weight behind it that had nothing to do with volume. But it landed in the room like something dropped from a height and every person at that table felt it.

He looked at Maren.

“You should’ve stopped talking two sentences ago,” he said.

Maren went white.

Not pale. White. The color left her face the way water left a cloth when you wrung it out, completely and all at once, and what was left behind was something I’d never seen on Maren’s face in twenty years of watching it.

She didn’t speak.

Call it what its 2-

Claim

“Institutional decisions,” he said. “Made over a long period. By multiple people.” He looked at her. “You’ve just described a system. A deliberate, maintained, multi year system designed to keep a person chained in a shack and you’ve called it a deferral of conversation.”

Maren’s folded hands had gone very still.

“The wolfsbane recommendation,” he said. “Which healer made it?”

A pause.

“Our previous healer,” Maren said. “She’s no longer with the pack.”

“Convenient,” he said. “I’ll want her name and her current location.”

Maren’s mouth opened slightly and then closed again.

“The unpredictable behavior you mentioned,” he said. “Describe it.”

Another pause. Longer this time.

“She was distressed in the initial period,” Maren said carefully. “She resisted the arrangement.”

“She was fifteen years old and she was being chained to a floor,” he said. “What you’re calling unpredictable behavior most people would call a reasonable response to an unreasonable situation.”

Maren said nothing.

I was watching her and I was thinking about every time she had come to my shack with that composed face and those folded hands and that particular tone of voice she used when she wanted me to understand that nothing I felt or thought or needed was relevant to any decision being made about me. I was thinking about the time she'd thrown hot water at me for setting a bowl down too hard. About the way she'd smiled at Rodan across the table the morning after a particularly bad night and said nothing.

She couldn't look at me.

She was looking at the table in front of her and her hands were still folded and she was holding herself together with what I could now see was enormous effort and she couldn't look at me.

Good.

He turned to Drace and Hadoc and Dolin and began asking questions and Maren stayed exactly where she was, folded hands, straight back, face the color of old ash, not saying another word.

She didn't speak again for the rest of the meeting.