The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 21

She is my mate–1

(Caius)

I finished with Drace and Hadoc and Dolin in under an hour.

Drace gave me the most. Not willingly, not at first, but he was a practical man and practical men understood quickly when the calculation had shifted past the point where protecting themselves meant protecting the people above them. He talked about the chain order, about the whipping schedule, about the pack hierarchy meetings where Isla's situation had been discussed and decided and maintained year after year. He kept his voice flat and his eyes on the table and he gave me names and dates and specific incidents and I let him give them without interrupting.

Hadoc gave me less but what he gave me confirmed what Drace had said. Dolin gave me almost nothing useful but his silence on certain questions was its own kind of answer.

Maren said nothing for the entire hour. She sat where she was with her hands folded and her face the color of ash and she didn't speak unless directly asked and when she was directly asked she gave me the shortest possible answer and stopped.

When I was done I dismissed them and told them to remain available and not to speak to each other about what had been discussed in this room. They filed out. Maren last, without looking at Isla as she passed her.

I looked at Isla.

She was still in the chair where Zeron had put her. She'd been there through the entire meeting, in the corner of the room, not at the table, and she'd been so still for so long that some of the hierarchy members had seemed to forget she was there. I'd been aware of her the entire time. Vorak had made sure of that.

"The healer's coming," I said. "She'll see to your ankle before we do anything else."

Isla looked at me. She nodded.

"After that," I said, "I need to speak to the full pack again."

Something moved across her face. Not fear exactly. The particular watchfulness she had when she was trying to work out what a thing was going to cost her.

“You don’t have to be there,” I said. “Zeron can stay with you.”

She thought about it for a moment. Then she said, “I want to be there.”

She is my mate–1

I looked at her. She held my gaze and I could see the decision in her face, not impulsive, not emotional, considered. She’d thought about it and she’d decided and she wanted me to know it was her choice.

“Alright,” I said.

The Ashcrest healer came and went in thirty minutes. She was efficient and she kept her face carefully neutral while she treated Isla’s ankle and I watched her work and noted the particular kind of neutrality that came from a person who had known something was wrong for a long time and had made the choice not to do anything about it. That name was going on my list too.

When she finished I gave Isla a few minutes and then Zeron brought the pack back to the main hall.

They filled the room standing, all sixty members, the hierarchy at the front and the general pack behind them. Rodan was there too, brought in by two of my warriors, his face still marked from the wall. He stood at the side of the room and didn’t look at anyone.

I stood at the front.

Isla was to my right, a few feet away, standing on her own. She’d refused the chair Zeron had offered her for this. She was standing with her back straight and her eyes forward and she looked like someone who had decided something about themselves in the last few hours that they were not going to walk back.

I looked at the room.

“I have one thing to say to this pack before my investigation continues,” I said. “After I’ve said it there’ll be no discussion, no questions, and no responses. You’ll hear it and you’ll understand it and we’ll move forward.”

The room was very still.

I looked at Isla.

Then I looked back at the pack.

“Isla is my mate,” I said.

The silence lasted about two seconds.

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Chapter 22

She is my mate–2

Then the room changed.

Not loudly. Not with words, not immediately. It changed the way a room changed when something landed in it that nobody had prepared for and nobody knew how to process. I watched it move through the pack in a wave, starting at the front with the hierarchy where the shock hit hardest and fastest, and spreading back through the general members behind them.

Maren's folded hands came apart. She caught herself and put them back together but they'd come apart and I'd seen it.

Drace looked at the floor. Then at me. Then at Isla. Then back at me, with the expression of a man rapidly recalculating everything he thought he understood about the last five years and not liking where the numbers were landing.

Hadoc went completely still in a different way from before. The stillness of a man who had just understood the full weight of what he'd been complicit in.

Some of the general pack members were less controlled. I saw it in the faces at the back of the room. The ones who hadn't been directly involved in the decisions, who had just lived their lives and walked past that shack and done nothing. A woman near the center of the group put her hand over her mouth. A man to her left looked at Isla with an expression that was somewhere between disbelief and something that was going to sit with him for a long time.

And there were others.

The ones whose reaction was not horror at what had been done but something else. The ones whose faces showed a different kind of disbelief, not about the mate bond but about her. About the idea that the Alpha King's mate was the wolfless girl they'd watched be whipped in this yard. I saw it in three faces clearly and in several others less clearly and I noted every single one.

I let the silence sit for a long moment.

Then I started looking at faces.

Not moving, not speaking, just looking. I took my time. I moved my gaze from face to face at the front of the room and worked my way back and I let every person I looked at understand that I was seeing them and that what I was seeing was going into the same place where everything else I'd gathered today was going.

She is my mate–2

Several people looked at the floor when I reached them.

Several more looked at Isla and then quickly away.

One warrior near the back held my gaze for a moment longer than the others before he thought better of it.

I looked at Rodan last.

He was looking at Isla with an expression I read in about half a second. Not remorse. Not fear of what the mate bond meant for his situation, though that was there too. Something more specific. The expression of a man looking at a mistake he'd made and calculating how bad the consequences were going to be now that the size of the mistake had become clear.

Very bad, I thought. The consequences are going to be very bad.

I looked back at the room.

"My mate has been in this pack for twenty years," I said. "She's been in that shack for five. Every person in this room either made decisions that put her there, carried out those decisions, or knew about it and said nothing." I paused. "There is no version of this where that doesn't have consequences. The only question is what those consequences look like for each individual person and that is what my investigation is going to determine."

Nobody spoke.

"Dismissed," I said.

They moved. Faster than before. The room cleared in under a minute and when it was empty it was just me and Zeron and Isla and the particular quiet of a room where something significant had just happened.

I looked at Isla.

She was still standing where she'd been, back straight, eyes forward, and she was looking at the empty doorway where the pack had been with an expression I was getting better at reading. Not satisfaction. Not relief. Something quieter than either.

The expression of someone watching a truth they'd been carrying alone for a very long time finally become visible to other people.

I didn't say anything.

Neither did she.

This isn't possible–1

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Chapter 23

This isn't possible–1

(Isla)

I heard the words clearly.

The room was quiet enough that there was no possibility of mishearing them. He'd said them plainly, without hesitation, without any of the careful packaging that people used when they were saying something they weren't sure of. Just the words, flat and direct, the same way he said everything.

Isla is my mate.

I stood where I was and I let the words sit in front of me and I tried to make sense of them.

Mate bonds were something I knew about the way I knew about most things in pack life, from the outside, from watching other people experience them, from listening to conversations I wasn't supposed to be part of. I knew what they were. The pull between two wolves whose animals recognised each other. The bond that formed when two people were meant to be paired, deep and permanent and not something that could be chosen or refused once it arrived.

Two wolves.

I looked down at my hands.

I didn't have a wolf. I'd never had a wolf. I'd stood in this pack's yard on my fifteenth birthday and waited and nothing had come and Rodan had looked at my father and my father had looked at the ground and that had been the beginning of everything that came after. Wolfless. That was what I was. That was what I'd been told I was every day for five years in ways that ranged from words to chains.

How could I be anyone's mate?

I looked up.

He was already looking at me.

He'd been looking at me, I realised, since the moment he'd said it. Not at the pack, not at Rodan, not at the room full of shocked faces that were still trying to process what they'd just heard. At me. Like the rest of the room had stopped being relevant the moment the words were out and I was the only thing left worth looking at.

I didn't know what to do with that.

I'd been looked at in this pack my whole life. I knew every kind of look that existed in it. Rodan's look that said you are mine to do with as I please. Maren's look that said you are beneath my notice except when you are useful to my cruelty. My father's look that said I have decided not to see you. Brent's look that said I am going to enjoy this. Vera's look that said I see you but looking away is easier than doing anything about it.

This was not any of those looks.

It wasn't pity either. I'd seen pity before, from the occasional pack member who hadn't entirely lost whatever was left of their conscience, and it always had a particular quality to it, a distance, a relief that the person feeling it was not in the position they were pitying. This didn't have that distance. There was no relief in it. Whatever he was feeling when he looked at me he was feeling it straight on without any buffer between him and it.

It wasn't cruelty. It wasn't indifference. It wasn't the particular blankness of someone who had decided I wasn't worth the energy of a real expression.

I couldn't name what it was.

That was the thing that made my chest feel strange. Not the words, not the announcement in front of sixty pack members, not the shock moving through the room in a wave I could feel even from where I was standing. The look. The fact that I was standing in the same room where I'd scrubbed floors and served meals and kept my eyes down for five years and this man was looking at me like I was someone worth looking at. Not like a problem. Not like a burden. Not like something that needed to be managed or contained or forgotten.

Like a person.

Like someone whose face was worth remembering.

I made myself think clearly.

Mate bonds happened between wolves. I had no wolf, or at least I'd been told I had no wolf for so long that I'd accepted it as fact the same way I'd accepted everything else that had been told to me in this pack. But this man had walked into my shack and something had happened to him when he looked at me, I'd seen it even though I hadn't understood it at the time, that stillness that had come over him, that complete stopping that had nothing to do with shock or disgust or any of the reactions I'd expected.

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Chapter 24

This isn't possible–2

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe the bond had misfired somehow. Maybe he'd felt something that wasn't what he thought it was and he'd made an announcement to sixty pack members based on a mistake.

I looked at him and he was still looking at me and the thing in his expression was still there, steady and present and not going anywhere, and I thought about the way he'd asked my permission before he touched me, the way he'd given me a second when I went rigid, the way he'd said her name is Isla in that room full of hierarchy members who'd spent five years calling me everything except my name.

Maybe he wasn't wrong.

The room was still full of pack members processing what they'd just been told. I could feel the shock of it around me without looking directly at any of them. I could feel Maren's particular stillness somewhere to my left, the kind of stillness that came from someone trying very hard not to react visibly. I could feel the weight of sixty people recalculating everything they thought they knew about this day and what it meant.

My father was somewhere in the back of the room.

I didn't look for him. I'd looked for him in the yard when Rodan went through the wall and his face had given me nothing and I didn't need to see it give me nothing again right now.

I kept my eyes on the man at the front of the room.

He looked away from me eventually, back at the pack, and began speaking again, and I listened to him say my mate has been in this pack for twenty years and heard every word of it land in the room like something with real weight, and I stood with my back straight the way I'd decided I was going to stand in this room and I kept my face where I needed it to be.

But the strange feeling in my chest didn't go away.

It was still there when he dismissed the pack and the room cleared and it was just the three of us left, me and him and the large man who'd been standing near the door the whole time.

I looked at the empty doorway.

Mate. His mate.

I turned the word over again the way I'd been turning it over since he said it and I still couldn't make it fit the shape of my life, couldn't make it sit alongside chains and shacks and wolfsbane burns and a father who wouldn't meet my eyes. Those things and this word belonged to two completely different worlds and I was standing in the place where they'd collided and I didn't know yet what that meant.

I heard him move and I looked at him.

He was looking at me again. Just looking, the way he'd been looking at me since the shack, like he was waiting for something from me that he wasn't going to rush.

"Are you alright?" he said.

Nobody in this pack had asked me that in five years.

I opened my mouth and closed it and tried again.

"I don't have a wolf," I said.

He looked at me for a moment.

"I know," he said.

"Then how."

"I don't know yet," he said. "But the bond is real. I felt it." He paused. "Whatever the reason for it we'll find out. But the bond is real."

I looked at him.

He looked back at me and that expression was still there, the one I couldn't name, steady and present and unlike anything I'd ever been given by anyone in this pack.

I didn't say anything else.

Neither did he.

But the strange feeling in my chest stayed exactly where it was.

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Chapter 25

Nothing left behind–1

(Caius)

I sent for Sera before the pack had fully cleared the hall.

Not the Ashcrest healer who'd treated Isla's ankle earlier. That woman had done what was asked of her and nothing more and I'd noted the careful blankness she'd maintained throughout, the face of someone who had seen Isla before and had chosen to keep that knowledge to herself. I wasn't going to put Isla in her hands again for anything beyond what had already been done.

Sera was my healer. She'd traveled with us from Wraithbone, the way she always traveled with me on pack visits, because eight years of ruling had taught me that having your own healer present was never a waste. She was waiting in the rooms my warriors had been given in the east wing and she came immediately when Zeron knocked on her door.

I met her in the corridor outside the room where Isla was resting.

"I need you to examine her fully," I said. "Not just the ankle. Everything. I want to know the full picture before we travel."

Sera looked at me with the particular expression she used when she was assessing whether to ask questions or simply proceed. She'd worked with me long enough to read when questions were welcome and when they weren't.

"How old is she?" she said.

"I don't know," I said. "Young."

Sera nodded and went in.

I stayed outside.

I could've gone in. There was no practical reason not to. But something in me understood that Isla had spent five years having very little control over who was in her space and what they did there and adding my presence to a medical examination she hadn't asked for felt like one more thing being done to her without her choosing it. Sera would handle it. I trusted Sera completely and that was enough.

I stood in the corridor and I waited.

Zeron came and stood beside me after a few minutes. He didn't say anything. He'd been doing that all day, appearing when I needed someone present and staying quiet when quiet was what the moment required. It was one of the things that made him valuable beyond his

Nothing left behind–1 rank.

"The investigation materials are being compiled," he said eventually. "Pryor will have everything sorted by morning."

"Good," I said.

We were quiet again.

I was listening through the door without meaning to. Not to words, Sera was too professional for anything to carry through clearly, just the general sound of the room. Movement. The occasional quiet instruction. Isla's voice once, short and low, answering something.

Eleven minutes after she went in Sera came back out.

I looked at her face.

That was all I needed. Whatever I'd been holding in check since the moment I pushed open that shack door pulled hard against its cord because Sera's face, which I'd seen receive the worst kinds of news over eight years without fully breaking, was not where it usually was. She'd put it back together before she opened the door. She was professional enough for that. But I'd known her long enough to see the effort it was costing her and the effort told me everything the words hadn't said yet.

She pulled the door closed behind her.

"Tell me," I said.

She took a breath. "The ankle injury is the most visible but it's not the most serious. Long term malnutrition, her body hasn't been getting what it needs for years, not months. There's scarring on her back from repeated whipping over an extended period. Some of the older marks go back further than five years, which means this started before the shack." She paused. "There are other injuries. Older ones that were never treated properly. A rib that healed badly. Two fingers on her left hand that were broken at some point and set themselves."

I said nothing.

“She’s in reasonable shape considering,” Sera said. “She’s resilient. Her body has been managing on very little for a long time and it’s adapted. But she needs proper food consistently, rest, and time. The wolfsbane exposure has suppressed her system in ways that will take weeks to fully clear.”

“Is she safe to travel tonight?”

Nothing left behind–1

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Chapter 26

Nothing left behind 2

Nothing left behind–2

Sera considered. “If you go carefully and she’s kept warm and comfortable, yes. Pushing her hard wouldn’t be wise but a steady journey should be manageable.”

“We won’t push,” I said.

Sera nodded. She started to move and then stopped.

“Alpha King,” she said. “The rib. The fingers. Those injuries are old. They happened when she was young. Before the shack.”

I looked at her.

“I know,” I said.

She held my gaze for a moment and then she nodded again and walked back toward the east wing.

I stood in the corridor alone.

I put one hand flat against the wall and I stood there and I breathed and I let the cord hold for a few more seconds while I got everything back behind it. The rib. The fingers. Injuries that had happened to a child and been left to heal on their own because nobody had thought to treat them.

I thought about the family that had been in this pack for two decades, the warrior father, the mother, the siblings, and I thought about a girl growing up in that house before the shack existed and what that had looked like.

Then I pushed off the wall and opened the door.

Isla was sitting on the edge of the bed Sera had examined her on. She looked up when I came in and her expression did the thing it always did, that quick assessment, reading me before I'd said a word.

"We're leaving tonight," I said. "As soon as you're ready. You'll come to Wraithbone with me."

She looked at me for a moment.

"What about the investigation?" she said.

"My head of counsel will stay and oversee it," I said. "He's thorough and he answers to me. Nothing will be missed."

She nodded.

"Is there anything in the shack you want to take with you?" I said.

Nothing left behind 2

She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "There are a few things. Behind a loose board in the wall."

I didn't ask what they were. I simply picked her up and carried her back across the grounds to the shack for the last time.

I carried her through the door and set her down carefully and she crossed to the far corner and crouched down and pulled a loose piece of wall board away from the base of the wall.

I looked at what she brought out.

A small folded stack of worn clothing. Two pairs of undergarments that were barely holding together. A handful of pads she'd clearly collected carefully over a long period, each one preserved like something valuable because to her they had been. A worn down toothbrush. A tube of / toothpaste squeezed nearly flat.

She held them against her chest and looked up at me like she was waiting for me to react to what they were.

I looked at her.

"Leave them," I said.

She went still.

“All of it,” I said. “Leave it here. You won’t need any of it.”

She looked down at what she was holding. I could see her working through it, the instinct to keep what little she had fighting against whatever she was starting to understand about what was being offered to her instead.

“I’ll get you everything you need at Wraithbone,” I said. “New. Everything new. You won’t leave that room looking for anything because it’ll already be there.”

She looked at me for a long moment.

Then she set it all down on the floor of the shack. The worn clothes and the carefully saved pads and the worn down toothbrush, set them down in the dirt where they’d come from, and she stood up with nothing in her hands.

She didn’t look back at them.

I picked her up again and carried her out of that shack and once she was safely across the grounds and back inside I turned and walked back to it alone.

I stood in front of it for a moment. The rotting walls and the broken roof and the ring still bolted to the floor inside. Five years of wolfsbane soaked into the wood. Five years of everything that had been done to her in that room sitting in the walls like something that needed to be removed from the world entirely.

I gave the order to one of my warriors standing nearby.

The shack was burning before I reached the pack house door.

I didn’t look back at it.

I settled Isla back in the room and looked at her.

“Rest,” I said. “I’ll come for you in an hour.”

I turned to leave.

“Why are you doing this?” she said.

1 stopped. Turned back.

She was looking at me with that direct look she had, the one that had been there since the shack, underneath all the fear and the caution, this core of something that five years of chains hadn’t managed to reach.

Nooked at her.

“Because you’re mine to protect,” I said. “And nobody did.”

I left before she could answer.

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Chapter 27

No one is innocent

(Caius)

I gave the order that evening.

Every warrior I had with me was assigned a section of the pack to work through. Not just the hierarchy, not just the people who had given the orders or carried them out directly. Everyone. Every wolf who had lived on that land for the past five years and had therefore known. I wanted names, ranks, specific incidents where they could be confirmed, and the role each person had played, whether that role was active cruelty, direct participation, or simply the choice to look the other way every single day for five years and call it none of their business.

I told my warriors to be thorough and I told them that incomplete work would require them to come back and do it again and none of them wanted that. They were thorough.

I spent the hours while they worked going through Ashcrest’s pack records with Pryor. Fourteen years of Rodan’s administration laid out in documents that had clearly never been written with the expectation that anyone outside the pack would read them. People wrote differently when they thought no one important was watching. The records confirmed what Drace had told me and added detail that Drace had either forgotten or chosen not to volunteer.

By the time the list arrived it was late. The pack house was quiet. Most of Ashcrest’s members had gone to their rooms, not because they wanted to sleep but because being visible felt dangerous and their rooms were the only place that felt marginally safer than anywhere else tonight. I didn’t mind that. I preferred them contained.

I was sitting at the table in the room Rodan used as his office when the warrior brought the list in. He handed it over without a word and I told him to go and eat and rest and he left and I sat alone and opened it.

It was longer than I’d expected.

Not because I'd underestimated Rodan's pack. I'd known from the moment I walked into that shack that what had been done to Isla hadn't happened in secret. It had happened in plain sight of sixty wolves who had all made their choices about it every single day. I'd known the list would be long. But knowing something and seeing it written out in full, name after name after name, rank and role and specific incident beside each one, were two different things and the difference between them sat in my chest in the same cold settled way it had been sitting since I first looked at her ankle.

I read every name.

Rodan first. Then Maren. The chain order, the whipping schedule, the specific dates where the records showed it had gotten worse. Then Derek Thorne, her father, who had not only failed to protect his daughter but had actively petitioned Rodan for the chain in the first place. The document my warriors had found in Ashcrest's records had Derek's signature on it. His request. His handwriting. I read that twice.

Helene Thorne, her mother. No direct participation in the abuse but present in the household for the years before the shack and present on the land for the five years after. The records showed she had never once gone to the shack. Not once in five years.

Brent Thorne. The incidents documented against him went back further than the shack. Physical incidents in the family home before Isla's fifteenth birthday, before Rodan made his decision, when she had still been living with her family and he had been old enough to know better and had / chosen not to be.

Vera Thorne. She had watched. Known. Been present in the household and on the land and had chosen her own comfort over her sister every single day. Silence had its own weight on a list like this and hers was documented clearly enough.

Drace. Hadoc. Dolin. Their roles and their specific failures set out in plain language.

Torvin, the guard. His was different from the others and my warriors had noted that. He had carried out orders without additional cruelty, no documented incidents of personal violence beyond the chain itself. That distinction would matter when the time came.

Then the pack members. Name after name after name of wolves who had walked past that shack every day and gone about their lives. Some of them had direct incidents documented, casual cruelty, participation in the yard whippings, refusal to provide basic necessities when it had been within their power to do so. Others had nothing specific beyond the simple fact of their presence and their silence.

I read to the end of the list.

Then I sat with it.

The fire in the corner of the room had burned down to low and the room was darker than it had been when I started reading and I hadn't noticed either of those things happening.

Zeron came in while I was still sitting there. He did that sometimes, came in without knocking when he judged that waiting outside was less useful than being in the room. I heard him come through the door and I didn't look up from the list.

He crossed to the desk and I handed it to him without being asked.

No one is innocent

He read through it. I watched him read, not his face exactly, just his presence, the way it changed as he moved through the pages. He was quiet the whole way through. When he reached the end he set it down on the desk between us.

I looked at him then.

Whatever was in my eyes in that moment I wasn't trying to control or contain it and Vorak was not helping me contain it either. Eight years of ruling had taught me when to keep everything behind the cord and when the cord had no function anymore because the decision had already been made and what was behind it was simply the reality of what came next.

Zeron took a step back.

Not much. Just one step. The involuntary step of a man whose wolf had registered something and responded before he could stop it. He'd been my beta for six years and he'd seen me after battles and border executions and the worst kinds of pack politics and he had never once taken that step before.

He took it now.

"Every name on that list," I said. "I want charges prepared for every single one. Specific, documented, individual charges. Nobody shares a charge with anyone else. Every person on that list answers for what they did personally."

Zeron nodded. His voice when he spoke was completely level. "It'll be ready."

"Good," I said.

I picked up the list and folded it and put it in the inside pocket of my jacket and I looked at the door that led to the corridor where Isla was resting in a room that was not a shack.

Every name on that list was going to answer for what they did.

Every single one.

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Chapter 28

The road out–1

(Isla)

He came for me when the sky was still dark.

A knock at the door, two short ones, and then his voice saying it was time. I'd been awake already. I hadn't slept much. The bed in the room they'd put me in was a real bed, not the floor, not the blanket in the corner, a real bed with a frame and a proper mattress and a pillow and I'd lain in it for hours in the dark trying to understand what it meant that nobody was coming to chain me.

I kept waiting for the sound of Torvin's boots.

They never came.

I got up when he knocked and opened the door and he looked at me the way he'd been looking at me since the shack, that direct and unreadable thing, and said the horses were ready. I followed him through the pack house corridors and out through the front door into the cold dark morning and I didn't look at anything as we walked. Not the kitchen where I'd spent years on my feet before the sun came up. Not the main hall where I'd served and cleaned and kept my eyes down. Not the yard where Rodan had stood with his hands behind his back and watched.

I didn't look at any of it.

The horses were at the front gate. His warriors were already mounted, twelve of them in a line, and

Sera, the healer who had treated me the night before, was mounted to one side of them. The large man was standing near the front holding a large dark horse that stood very still.

I looked at the horse and then down at my ankle and I didn't say anything but he saw it. He always seemed to see things before I had to explain them.

He came and stood in front of me.

"I'll lift you up," he said. "You'll ride in front of me."

It wasn’t a question but it wasn’t a command either. It sat somewhere between the two in the way a lot of things he said sat, like a decision that had already been made by someone who had considered all the options and chosen the one that made the most sense.

I nodded.

He lifted me the same way he had before, careful and without any sudden movement, and settled me onto the horse and then mounted behind me in one easy movement. His arm came around to take the reins and I was enclosed without being trapped, his presence behind me large and solid and not pressing in, just there.

DOW

The road out–1

I sat very still and looked straight ahead.

He said something quietly to the large man and then we moved.

Through the gate. Out onto the pack grounds.

The grounds were empty at this hour. The pack was inside, every one of them, and none of them came out to watch us leave. I didn’t know whether that was because they’d been told to stay in or because they’d made that choice themselves and it didn’t matter either way. The result was the same. We rode through Ashcrest in silence with nobody watching and the only sound was the horses on the dirt and the wind in the trees at the edge of the land.

I didn’t mean to look.

But as we rode east toward the tree line I turned my head and I saw it.

Where the shack had been there was nothing but a black patch of ground and the remains of what had burned, collapsed walls and ash and the faint glow of embers that hadn’t fully died yet. The roof was gone. The floor was gone. Everything that had made up that room was ash and scorched earth and the smell of it carried on the cold morning air.

I stared at it.

It had been standing when he’d carried me back to the pack house earlier. I knew that. I’d left my things on the floor of it and walked out and he’d carried me back inside and then at some point between that and now someone had burned it down.

I felt him behind me, his presence completely still, not shifting or turning toward where I was looking. He didn’t say anything.

OO

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 29

Unlock its ok 29

The road out–2

1 didn't know for certain that it was him. I had no proof of it and I wasn't going to ask because asking felt like the kind of thing that required more words than I had available right now. But nothing happened on this land tonight without his knowledge or his order and the shack/had been standing this morning and now it wasn't and those two facts sat next to each other in a way that was hard to look at directly.

I turned away.

Not because I couldn't look at it. Because I'd looked long enough and there was nothing left there that I needed to see and the horse under us was moving forward and forward was the only direction that made any sense right now.

We passed through the tree line and Ashcrest disappeared behind us.

I didn't look back again.

The forest was dark and quiet around us, the Appalachian trees thick on both sides of the road, and the horses moved at a pace that was easy and unhurried. The cold was real but the cloak one of the warriors had given me was warm and the heat of the man behind me kept the worst of it off.

We had been riding for about an hour when one of the warriors moved his horse up alongside ours to report something. He spoke in a low voice and I wasn't paying close attention to the words, just the sound of the forest around us, until I heard what he called the man behind me.

Alpha King.

I went very still.

The warrior finished speaking and dropped back and the road went quiet again and I sat there on the horse and I let those two words settle into me and tried to make them fit against everything that had happened since the shack door opened.

Alpha King.

Caius Blackthorn.

The man I had been hearing about my whole life in dropped voices and careful words. The man packs surrendered to before he even spoke. The man who had become the most feared ruler in the werewolf world at twenty years old and had held it for eight years without a single successful challenge.

That was who was sitting behind me.

That was whose arm was holding the reins on either side of me. Whose horse I was sitting on.

Who had crouched down in the dirt of my shack and reached for my wolfsbane chain and felt the burn of it without flinching.

I became aware of myself in a way I hadn't been a minute ago.

My hair was unwashed. I'd done what I could with the water in the room the night before but it was still tangled and dull and nothing like the way a person's hair should look. My clothes were the ones

I'd been wearing when he found me, the torn shirt and the oversized trousers held up with cord, because I had nothing else and he'd told me to leave everything in the shack. The scars on my back were hidden under the cloak but they were there. The burn on my ankle was there. The bruising on my face that Sera had treated was still visible, she'd told me it would take time to fully fade.

This was what I looked like sitting in front of the Alpha King.

I stared at the road ahead and said nothing and tried not to think about it too hard but the thought had arrived and it wasn't going anywhere. Every story I'd ever heard about Caius Blackthorn had described a man who commanded the most powerful pack in the territory, who was surrounded by the strongest wolves alive, who had never in eight years of ruling shown particular interest in anyone or anything beyond the running of his kingdom.

And he had walked into my shack.

And he had said I was his mate.

And now I was sitting in front of him on his horse with tangled hair and borrowed clothes and a burned ankle and I had absolutely no idea what I was supposed to do with any of that.

The road kept going.

He didn't say anything.

I pulled the cloak a little closer and kept my eyes forward and tried to breathe normally and told myself that whatever came next it was still better than the chain.

It was still better than the chain.

I held onto that and let the horse carry us through the dark forest toward a place I'd never been and tried to believe that the road ahead was going somewhere worth going.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 30

Through the gate–1

(Isla)

I smelled the territory before I saw it.

Something different in the air, cleaner than Ashcrest had ever been, the kind of forest smell that came from land that was well maintained and well kept, where the trees were old and the borders were secure and nothing within them had been neglected for a long time. I noticed it without meaning to, the way you noticed things when your body had spent years reading environments for danger and was always paying attention even when your mind was trying to rest.

The sun was up properly by the time we crossed the border.

There were guards at the Wraithbone boundary line. Two of them, well built and alert, who straightened when they saw us coming and then immediately stepped aside without a word. They didn't ask questions. They didn't check anything. They simply saw who was at the front of the group and moved and that alone told me something about what kind of pack this was and what kind of man led it.

We rode through.

The territory opened up as we came through the tree line and I understood immediately why it was called what it was. The land was vast, more land than I'd expected, stretching out in every direction with the mountains visible in the distance and the forest running along the edges of it like walls that had been placed there on purpose. Everything about it was built with scale in mind. The training grounds were three times the size of Ashcrest's. The outer buildings were solid and well maintained, no patched wood, no leaning fences, no sign that anything here had ever been allowed to fall into disrepair.

And then I saw the pack house.

It sat at the highest point of the land, which itself was already elevated above the surrounding territory, and it was the largest building I had ever seen up close. Not just large the way impressive things were large. Large in a way that felt like a statement, like something that had been built specifically to make clear to anyone who approached it exactly what kind of power lived inside.

Three stories. Wide enough that I couldn't see both ends of it at the same time from where we were on the road. Windows lit even in the morning light.

I stared at it.

I had spent five years in a shack with rotting walls and a hole in the roof.

The size of the distance between those two things was not something I had words for

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We rode up the main path toward the pack house and I became aware of people. Not a crowd, not all at once, but pack members appearing at doorways and along the edges of the path, drawn out by the sound of horses and the return of their king. They came out the way pack members always came out when something was happening, quietly and watchful, positioning themselves where they could see without being obvious about it.

They were looking at me.

I felt it before I confirmed it, that particular awareness of being observed that I'd spent twenty years developing into something close to a sixth sense. Their eyes weren't on him. He was their king and they knew him and his return was not what was pulling their attention. I was. The girl sitting in front of him on his horse, wrapped in a borrowed cloak, who had clearly not come from anywhere nearby and had clearly not been expected.

My head went down.

It happened before I decided to do it. Twenty years of habit and five years of specific training in how to make yourself invisible when eyes were on you. Head down, eyes on the ground in front of the horse, take up as little space as possible and give nobody a reason to look harder than they already were.

I caught myself doing it almost immediately.

I was not in Ashcrest anymore. These were not Ashcrest wolves. The man behind me was not

Rodan and the people watching from the path were not the pack that had watched me be whipped in the yard. None of the rules that had kept me alive for five years applied here and I knew that in the part of my mind that processed information clearly.

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