

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

chapter 3

Holding it in

1370 Words

(Isla) I did not get through the day. Not without it falling apart first. Dinner was the worst part of every day. Not because of the cooking. I could cook. I had been doing it since I was twelve years old in this kitchen, alone, no help, no one beside me. I knew where everything was, knew how long each dish took, knew the exact way Alpha Rodan liked his meat and the exact way Luna Maren liked her soup or she would send it back without a word and just look at me until I fixed it. The worst part was the serving. One long table. The entire Ashcrest Pack seated along both sides of it with Rodan at the head and Maren beside him. Thirty something wolves watching me come out of that kitchen with each plate and move from one end of the table to the other, one person at a time. No room to rush. No room to shake. No room to be anything other than invisible and correct. I had been doing it my whole life and it still made my hands uncertain every single time. Tonight my back was still burning from the morning. Every time I moved too fast or reached too far I felt it pull and I had to breathe through it without letting it show on my face. I carried the first plates out and started at Rodan's end. He did not look at me when I set his plate down. He never did. I was furniture to him unless I did something wrong, and then I was very visible indeed. I moved down the table. Pack members shifted in their seats, reached for their drinks, talked across each other. A few of them looked at me as I passed. Most did not bother. I had learned the ones who watched me closely were the ones to be careful around. Not because they were worse than the others. Just because they were paying attention. I got to the middle of the table where my family sat. Brent was already leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed, watching me come toward him with that look he had. The one that was already bored and already looking for something. I set his plate down. "That's too much rice," he said. "I can take some off," I said. "I didn't say take some off," he said. "I said it's too much." I picked up his plate and took it back to the kitchen and removed some rice and brought it back out. He looked at it. Then he picked up his fork and started eating without another word. My mother watched the whole thing and said nothing. Vera was next to her, already looking at her food before I had even set it down. Cole took his plate without looking at me at all. I kept moving. I was on my way back to the kitchen for the last plates when Brent stuck his foot out. I did not see it until I was already going down. My knee hit the stone floor hard and the empty tray in my hands clattered and slid and the sound of it cut straight through the room. Every conversation at that table stopped. I felt it before I even looked up, that specific silence that meant everyone was looking at me. I pressed my hand to the floor and pushed myself up. My knee was throbbing and I could feel the heat already rising in it. "Careful," Brent said. A few wolves near him made sounds that were almost laughs. Not full laughs. Just enough to make the point. I picked up the tray and went back to the kitchen. My hands were not still when I picked up the last plates. I made myself breathe and I made myself move and I told myself it was fine, I was fine, I just had to finish the serving and then I could be in the kitchen again where at least there was no one watching. I came back out with the last two plates and set them down at the far end of the table and that was when I heard Luna Maren's voice. "Isla." I turned. She was looking at her bowl with one finger pointing at something near the edge of it. "Come here," she said. I walked to the head of the table. Every set of eyes followed me. I stopped beside her chair and looked at where she was pointing. There was a small piece of something dark near the side of her soup. I did not know what it was. A speck. Something so small I had to lean closer to see it. "What is that," she said. "I don't know," I said. "I'm sorry. I'll replace it." "You'll replace it," she said, not like a question. Like she was repeating something that barely made sense to her. "You'll replace it. After I sat here and

looked at this." "I'm sorry," I said again. She picked up the bowl and held it out toward me without looking at me. I took it. As I turned to go back to the kitchen she spoke again. "You have lived in this pack your whole life," she said. "Your whole life and you still cannot manage to produce a clean bowl of soup." I said nothing. I walked back to the kitchen. My father's voice followed me through the room, not loud enough for everyone to hear, but loud enough for the people closest to him. "Worthless girl," he said. "Always has been." Nobody told him to stop. Nobody ever told him to stop. I stood at the stove in the kitchen and ladled new soup into a clean bowl and I pressed my lips together and I held everything in the way I had learned to hold it. There was a pressure behind my eyes that I refused to let go anywhere. I blinked it back and I carried the bowl out and I set it in front of Luna Maren and I stepped back. She looked at it. Then she picked up her spoon and started eating. That was it. No thank you. No acknowledgment. I had replaced it and now I did not exist again. I went back to the kitchen. I stood at the counter and gripped the edge of it with both hands and I breathed. In and out. In and out. The burning on my back from the morning was getting worse, not better, because I had been on my feet for hours and the movement kept pulling at it. Something was shifting inside me tonight. I did not know what to call it. I had grown up in this pack, in this kitchen, in this exact spot, and every day had been some version of today and I had always been able to press everything down and get to the next morning. Tonight it was harder. Tonight the pressing down was not working the way it usually did. I washed the pots while the pack finished their meal. I could hear them through the kitchen door, the noise of it, voices and movement and the sounds of a group of people who were comfortable where they were. When they were done I would go back out and clear the table and wash every dish and clean the kitchen from top to bottom and then Torvin would come and walk me to my shack and lock the chain around my ankle and that would be today. I pressed my hand flat against the counter. Just get through today. It was what I always told myself. It was the only thing that had ever worked. But standing in that kitchen with my knee throbbing and my back burning and the sound of my father's voice still sitting somewhere in my chest, I was not sure how many more todays I had left in me. The Alpha King was coming to Ashcrest. I did not know what that meant. I did not have room to think about it. I picked up the cloth and went back to work.