The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 31

Unlock its ok 3

Through the gate–2

The part of me that had been trained by years of pain was harder to convince.

I made myself lift my head. Not all the way. Not with the kind of ease that would have come naturally to someone who hadn't spent half a decade learning that being seen was dangerous. But I lifted it enough to look at the path ahead rather than the ground and I held it there and I focused on breathing.

He said nothing.

But I felt something shift slightly in his posture behind me, a small and almost imperceptible change in the way he was sitting, and I understood that he had seen what I did and what I did after and was noting both without making it into a moment I had to respond to.

That was something I was still getting used to. The way he noticed things and didn't immediately make them into something I had to deal with. Every person who had ever noticed something about me in Ashcrest had used it. For leverage or for cruelty or for their own purposes. He just noticed and kept moving and let me have whatever I needed to have without turning it into a transaction.

I didn't know what to do with that yet.

We reached the front of the pack house and he brought the horse to a stop and dismounted first and then reached up for me the way he had at Ashcrest, hands at my waist, lifting me down carefully with my ankle kept clear of anything that would knock it. He set me down on the ground and kept one hand near my arm until I'd found my footing and then stepped back and gave me room.

The large man was there immediately, already dismounted, and a few other people I didn't recognise had come forward from the pack house entrance. An older man with silver hair and papers under his arm who looked at me with an expression I couldn't quite read. Sera was already moving toward me from where she'd dismounted further down the line.

The pack members along the path were still watching.

I kept my head up. It was an effort and it showed but I kept it up.

Sera reached me first.

“How are you feeling?” she said. Her voice was the same as it had been in Ashcrest, quiet and direct, without the particular edge that some people put into questions when they weren’t really asking but performing concern.

“I’m alright,” I said.

Through the gate–2

She looked at me the way she’d looked at me when she was examining me, assessing rather than judging, and then nodded once like she’d confirmed something she’d already suspected.

“Come inside,” she said. “There’s food and a room and everything you need.”

I looked at the pack house entrance. At the size of it up close, the doors wide enough for several people to walk through at once, the stone steps leading up to them worn smooth from years of use.

I had never in my life walked through a door like that.

I looked back at him.

He was standing a few feet away talking to the silver haired man in a low voice, not looking at me, giving me a moment that I understood was deliberate. Not ignoring me. Giving me space to take in where I was without feeling watched while I did it.

I turned back to the entrance.

Sera was waiting at the bottom of the steps, not hurrying me, just there.

I took a breath and I walked forward and I went up the steps one at a time and I walked through the door of the Wraithbone pack house for the first time.

It was warm inside.

Not the kind of warmth that came from a fire that had been lit recently. The deep warmth of a building that was always kept this way, that had never been allowed to go cold, that had people in it who made sure of that.

I stood in the entrance and I felt it and I didn’t say anything.

I just stood there and let it be real.

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The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 32

Given, not taken-1

(Caius)

Pryor was waiting at the entrance when I came up the steps.

He had the look he always had when he'd been managing things in my absence and had a list of items requiring my attention and was debating how quickly to present them. I knew that look well enough to head it off before it started.

"Tomorrow," I said.

He opened his mouth.

"Tomorrow," I said again. "Everything that needs my attention will still need it tomorrow and I'll give it then. Not tonight."

He closed his mouth and nodded and stepped aside and I went through the entrance and into the pack house.

Isla was standing just inside the door.

She hadn't moved far from where she'd come in. She was standing in the entrance hall with Sera a few steps ahead of her and she was looking at the space around her with an expression I'd been watching her manage for two days now, that careful and controlled thing she did when something was affecting her and she didn't want it to show. It was getting easier for me to read the difference between her face when she was feeling nothing and her face when she was feeling something and working to keep it contained.

Right now she was working hard.

The entrance hall of Wraithbone was not modest. I hadn't built it to be modest. It was wide and high and lit well and the floors were stone and the walls were solid and every part of it announced without words that whoever lived here had not built it to impress visitors but simply because this was what their power looked like when it was given a physical form. I'd stopped seeing it years ago the way you stopped seeing the inside of any space you lived in every day.

I saw it now, through her eyes, and the distance between this and a rotting shack with a dirt floor sat in my chest the same way it had been sitting since I first found her.

I crossed the entrance hall and stopped beside her.

She looked up at me.

“I’ll show you to your room,” I said.

TH

? Given, not taken–1

My quarters were on the opposite side of the pack house. I was aware of that the same way I was aware of everything the bond wanted from me right now, constantly and without being able to fully set it aside. She was my mate and every instinct I had was pulling in one direction and the direction was not the east wing.

But she had spent five years having no control over her own space. No control over who came through her door or when. No control over anything that happened to her body or around it. The first thing I could give her that Ashcrest never had was a room that was entirely hers, where nothing happened without her choosing it and nobody came in without her permission. Including

The bond could wait. She came first.

She nodded and I led the way through the main corridor and up the stairs to the east wing. Sera followed behind us without being asked.

During the ride back from Ashcrest I’d sent a mind link to the head of household staff with a list of everything I wanted in the east wing room before we arrived. By the time we walked through the door it was done. That was how Wraithbone worked. An instruction went out and it was carried out completely and without delay and nobody asked questions about why the Alpha King wanted a room prepared for someone who had arrived with nothing.

I pushed the door open and stepped back and let her go in first.

She stopped in the doorway.

I watched her take it in.

The bed was against the far wall, large and properly made with thick covers and four pillows and the kind of mattress that had been chosen for comfort rather than practicality. A fire was already burning in the hearth and the room was warm all the way to the door. The window to the left looked out over the eastern forest and even in the low morning light the view was worth looking at.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 33

Given, not taken–2

Given, not taken–2

On the table near the window there was food. Proper food, more than enough of it, bread and fruit and cooked meat still warm and a pot of broth that Sera had instructed the kitchen to make specifically for someone whose body needed rebuilding rather than just feeding. Water and tea and juice and more than she could eat in one sitting because I wanted her to understand that there would always be more, that the concept of running out did not exist in this room.

Along the far wall the staff had done exactly what I'd asked. The wardrobe was full. Not with one or two practical sets of clothing but with enough that she would not wear the same thing twice in two weeks if she chose not to. Day clothes and warmer things for the colder mornings and softer things for evenings and all of it in her size and none of it the kind of worn borrowed thing she'd arrived in. On the shelves beside the wardrobe there were undergarments, several sets, and a full supply of pads, enough that she would never have to think about running short.

On the dressing table everything else had been arranged. Perfumes, four different ones, the kind that came in proper glass bottles. Lotions for her skin, a rich one for her face and a thicker one for the rest of her, both chosen by Sera who knew what a body recovering from years of neglect and wolfsbane exposure needed. Hair products, a wide brush and a finer one and oils for the ends and something to help with the tangles that five years of limited washing had left behind. Soaps that smelled like things that grew in forests and fields. A new toothbrush still wrapped, a full tube of toothpaste, everything arranged neatly on the surface like it had always been there and always would be.

On the small table beside the bed there was a phone. Brand new, already set up by one of my pack members who handled such things, with the basics loaded and ready. She didn't know how to use it yet, I understood that, but one of the pack members would show her and she would learn, and when she did she would have it.

She had left everything she owned on the floor of a shack that no longer existed.

This was what replaced it.

I watched her stand in the doorway and look at all of it and say nothing and I watched the careful management of her expression fail in a way it hadn't failed yet since I'd found her. Not dramatically.

Just at the edges, just enough that I could see what was underneath it, and what was underneath it was something I didn't have a word for but understood completely.

She walked into the room.

One step at a time, like she was moving through something that might turn out not to be real if she went too fast. She walked to the dressing table first and she looked at the perfumes and the

O 14 lotions and the hairbrush and she didn't touch anything. She just looked. Then she walked to the wardrobe and opened it and stood in front of the clothes for a long moment without saying a word.

Then she walked to the bed and put one hand on the cover and pressed down slightly the way you tested something to confirm it was solid.

It was solid.

She stood there with her hand on the cover and I watched something move through her face that she had no name for and neither did I but I understood what it was. The particular thing that happened when your body encountered something it had been denied for long enough that receiving it felt wrong before it felt right.

She was going to be alright.

Not tonight. Not tomorrow. But she was going to be alright and I was certain of that in a way I hadn't been certain of many things that weren't related to combat or territory management in eight years of ruling alone.

Sera moved past me into the room and began explaining things quietly, the phone and who would show her how to use it, the products on the dressing table and what each one was for, the food and where to find more when it was gone. She did it in the calm practical way she did everything and I stood in the doorway and watched and felt something in my chest that I'd also been feeling since the shack and still hadn't found a name for.

I wasn't going to find the name tonight.

"I'll leave you to rest," I said from the doorway.

Isla looked at me across the room. Her hand was still on the bedcover.

"Thank you," she said.

It was the first time she'd said those two words to me directly and something in the way she said them told me she didn't use them easily, that they were words she'd learned to be

careful with because gratitude in Ashcrest had always had a price attached to it and she was still waiting to find out what price was attached here.

I looked at her.

“There’s no price for it,” I said. “You don’t owe me anything for this room or anything in it. It’s yours.”

She looked at me for a moment.

Then she looked back at the bed and the fire and the food on the table and the window with the

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Given, not taken–2 eastern forest beyond it and I watched her try to believe that and not quite manage it yet.

She would. In time she would.

I stepped back from the doorway.

“Sera will be nearby if you need anything,” I said. “Sleep. Eat. That’s all you need to do tonight.”

I pulled the door closed behind me and stood in the corridor alone for a moment.

Then I walked back toward my office where the work of eight years of ruling was waiting for me and I let myself have exactly as long as it took to reach the end of the corridor to think about the look on her face when she pressed her hand into that bedcover.

Then I opened my office door and went back to work.

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The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 34

*Learning the silence–1

Learning the silence–1

(Isla)

Sera left me alone just before midnight.

She had spent the better part of the evening showing me things. The phone and how to turn it on and what the basic functions did, though most of it went over my head and she'd said not to worry that someone would sit with me properly tomorrow and go through it all at a slower pace. The products on the dressing table, what each one was for and how to use it. The wardrobe and where everything was folded and hung. She did it all without rushing me and without making me feel like I/ was supposed to know things I didn't know and when she finally said goodnight and pulled the door closed behind her the room went quiet.

I stood in the middle of it.

The fire had burned down to something lower and steadier than it had been when I first came in but the room was still warm and the warmth was real and present in a way that the cold of the shack had never fully left my bones no matter what season it was. I stood in the middle of the room and I breathed it in and I tried to let it be what it was.

I looked at the bed.

I'd been looking at it and then looking away from it all evening, the way you kept returning to something you weren't sure was safe to want yet. It was made properly, the covers pulled back on one side by one of the staff at some point during the evening, an invitation that was so normal and so foreign at the same time that I didn't know how to receive it

I was fifteen the last time I slept in a bed.

I remembered the one in the family home. It hadn't been much, a narrow frame and a thin mattress and a cover that had seen better days, but it had been mine and I'd slept in it every night for fifteen years and I hadn't understood until it was gone what it meant to have something as simple as a surface that kept you off the floor.

This bed was nothing like that one.

I walked to it and I sat down on the edge carefully, like sitting fully was a permission I hadn't been given yet. The mattress took my weight without complaint. The covers where my hand rested were thick and real and I pressed my fingers into them and felt the give of it.

Nobody was going to take this away.

I said that to myself clearly and plainly and tried to make it land somewhere it would stick. Nobody

* Learning the silence–1 was going to come through that door and tell me I'd used it wrong or that I'd lost the right to it or that it had never been mine in the first place. The man who had given me this room had said there was no price for it. He had looked at me when he said it in a way that did not leave room for negotiation or conditions and I was starting to understand that when he said something he meant it exactly as he said it, no more and no less.

I took my shoes off.

That was the first step. I set them beside the bed and I sat there for a moment and then I swung my legs up and I lay down and I pulled the cover over myself and I lay on my back and I looked at the ceiling.

The ceiling was solid. No holes. No cloth stuffed into gaps. No sound of wind coming through cracks in the walls because there were no cracks. The room was quiet in the way rooms were quiet when they were properly built, not the forced quiet of the shack where the silence had always felt like it was waiting for something to break it.

This quiet just was.

I lay in it and I waited for Torvin.

I knew he wasn't coming. I knew that with the part of my mind that understood facts and processed information and knew perfectly well that Torvin was in Ashcrest and I was in Wraithbone and there was a full day's ride between those two places and no chain in this room and nothing attached to the floor.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 35

Learning the silence–2

My body hadn't gotten that message yet.

My ankle felt strange without the weight of the cuff. It had felt strange since it was removed but I'd been moving and riding and occupied enough during the day that I hadn't had to sit with the strangeness of it. Now lying still in the dark with nothing to do but exist in this room my ankle was the most present part of me, the skin still raw and tender, the absence of the metal that had been, there every night for five years registering as something wrong even though it was right.

1 kept waiting for the sound of boots in the corridor.

Every time the pack house made a sound, a door somewhere down the hall, the natural settling of a large building in the night, my whole body would go alert in the particular way it had learned to go alert at certain sounds. Listening for the specific weight and rhythm of Torvin's walk. Ready to be still and compliant before the door opened.

The boots never came.

The door never opened.

An hour passed. Maybe more. The fire in the hearth had gone lower and the room was lit only by the glow of it and the pale light coming through the window from whatever was outside. I stared at the ceiling and I breathed and I waited and nothing came and slowly, very slowly, my body started to understand what my mind already knew.

Nobody was coming.

Not tonight. Not tomorrow night. Not any night after that.

I turned onto my side and looked at the window. Through the glass I could see the top of the tree line where the eastern forest began, the shapes of the oldest trees dark against a sky that had gone from black to the particular grey that came just before the light started to change. I'd watched that transition from the shack enough times to know what it looked like. From the shack it had meant the day was starting and the day meant work and pain and managing every moment carefully so as not to give anyone a reason to make it worse.

From this window it looked different.

I didn't know yet what the days here would look like. I didn't know what was expected of me or what role I was supposed to fill or how long I was going to be here or what came next in any practical sense. The man, Caius, the Alpha King, had not explained any of that and I had not asked because the day had been too full of other things and asking had always carried risk in my experience.

Learning the silence–2

But he had said the room was mine.

He had said there was no price.

He had looked at me in a way that nobody had ever looked at me before and I still didn't have a name for what that look was but it was there every time and it had not changed since the first moment he stood in my doorway and went completely still.

I closed my eyes.

I opened them again almost immediately because closing them felt unsafe and my body was still not convinced the room was real.

I closed them again.

This time I kept them closed.

The fire crackled once in the hearth and the building settled somewhere and the trees moved outside the window and nobody came through the door and slowly, in pieces, in the particular way sleep came to someone whose body had learned to stay alert even in unconsciousness, I went under.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 36

Not enough–1

Not enough–1

(Caius)

She came down for breakfast.

I hadn't been sure she would. Sera had told me the night before that Isla had finally slept and I'd been glad to hear it but sleep and being willing to sit at a table full of unfamiliar wolves were two different things and I hadn't wanted to assume one meant the other was coming easily.

But she came down.

Zeron had shown her where the main dining room was, I'd asked him to check on her in the morning and make sure she knew where to go, and she arrived just after the table had been set.

She was wearing new clothes, one of the simpler sets from the wardrobe, and her hair had been washed and was still damp at the ends and she looked different from the girl I'd carried out of that shack two days ago. Not completely different. The wariness was still in her face and she still moved through a room the way someone moved when they were expecting to need to get out of it quickly. But she was clean and she was here..

She sat at the far end of the table.

Not next to me. As far from the center of the room as she could get while still technically being at the table. I noted that and said nothing about it. She was choosing a position that

gave her the wall at her back and the clearest view of the room and the shortest distance to the door and those were not the choices of someone who was relaxed but they were the choices of someone who was trying and I was going to treat them as such.

The table had other people at it. Zeron my beta, Raith my gamma, Lira my delta, and Pryor who ate with me most mornings out of habit more than anything else. They had all been told before they came down that there was a guest and that the guest was my concern and not a subject for questions or particular attention and they had understood that the way my pack understood most things I said clearly, completely and without requiring repetition.

They greeted her when she sat. Briefly and without pressure. Zeron said good morning in the easy way he had with people and went back to his food. Raith nodded once and did the same. Lira looked at her directly for a moment with those amber eyes that missed nothing and then went back to her plate without comment. Pryor gave a short nod over his papers. Nobody stared.

She said good morning back in a quiet voice and then looked at the table.

The food came out the way it always did at Wraithbone, properly and in quantity, because I had no patience for a poorly run table any more than I had patience for anything else done without care in

Not enough–1 my own walls. There was bread and butter and fruit and eggs and meat and enough of everything that nobody at that table had ever needed to think about whether there would be sufficient.

Isla looked at it all when it was set down and then she looked at her plate.

She took a small piece of bread. Smaller than what any wolf her size needed to start a day on. She put it on her plate and she looked at it and she didn't take anything else for a long moment.

I watched her without watching her, the particular way I'd learned to observe things in/rooms without making it obvious that I was observing them. She wasn't ignoring the food. She was looking at it. But there was something in the way she was looking at it that I recognised after a moment as the same thing I'd seen when she walked into her room, that particular hesitation of someone who had been without something for so long that having it in front of them produced caution rather than appetite.

She ate the small piece of bread in careful bites.

Then she looked at the table and not at the food.

I understood.

Five years of not having enough had done something specific to the way her body and her mind related to food. It wasn't just hunger anymore. It was something more complicated than hunger, something that had to do with what food had meant in Ashcrest, who controlled it and what it cost and what happened when you took more than you were given. The table full of it in front of her was not a simple invitation. It was something she didn't yet know how to read as safe.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 37

t enough–2

Not enough–2

1 didn't say anything at the table.

I ate my own meal and I talked with Zeron about the border rotation schedule and I listened to Pryor outline the three items he considered most pressing from the stack that had accumulated while I was at Ashcrest and I gave my answers on each one and I let the meal happen around Isla without making her the center of it.

She ate one more small piece of bread before the meal ended. That was all.

When she excused herself and left the room I stayed where I was until she was gone and then I told Zeron to send the head of the kitchen to my office in ten minutes.

She arrived in eight.

She was a practical woman who had run my kitchen for six years and who understood that being summoned to my office was not a social visit and came prepared to listen rather than explain herself.

"The girl who was at breakfast this morning," I said.

"Yes, Alpha King."

"Every night from today I want a tray left outside her room before she goes to sleep. Not a small tray. A proper one. Bread, fruit, something cooked, water. Whatever is being made that evening. Enough that she could make a full meal of it if she chose to."

The kitchen head nodded without asking why.

"No questions asked when she takes it," I said. "Nobody tracking what she eats or doesn't eat.

Nobody commenting on it. Nobody reporting back to me about it. It goes outside her door every night and what happens to it after that is her business."

"Understood, Alpha King."

"If she comes to the kitchen at any hour and asks for anything, she gets it," I said. "No matter what time it is. No matter what it is. She doesn't need to explain herself or justify what she wants. She asks and it happens."

"Of course."

"That's all," I said.

She left.

Not enough–2

I sat back in my chair and looked at the window and thought about a girl who had spent five years being given just enough to survive on and sometimes not even that, who had learned to eat small and carefully and never to assume there would be more, who had sat at my table this morning surrounded by more food than she'd probably seen in years and had taken two small pieces of bread because she didn't yet know how to trust that the rest of it was allowed.

The tray outside her door every night was not a solution to that. It was a start. Something that was hers alone, that nobody else ate from and nobody else controlled, that was there every night without condition and without her having to ask for it or earn it or be grateful for it in any way that cost her something.

Food that simply existed for her because she existed.

She would learn in time that this was how things worked here. That the table was always full and always available and that nobody was keeping a count of what she took or using it as leverage for anything. She would learn it the same way she would learn everything else about this place, slowly and by evidence rather than by being told.

I was patient.

I had time.

And she was going to be alright.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 38

Careful observation–1

(Isla)

Zeron knocked on my door after breakfast.

I'd come back to my room and sat on the bed and looked at the window and tried to work out what I was supposed to do with a day that had no tasks in it. No dishes to wash. No floors to scrub. No list of things that needed doing before someone came to find out why they weren't done yet. Just a room and a window and time that belonged to nobody and I didn't know what to do with any of it.

The knock came mid morning. Two knocks, unhurried.

I opened the door and he was standing in the corridor with his hands at his sides and an expression that was easy without being false. He was very large, almost as large as Caius, with the kind of face that was built for being taken seriously and somehow managed to be approachable anyway.

"I thought you might want to see the grounds," he said. "If you're ready. There's no rush."

N looked at him for a moment.

In Ashcrest when someone offered to show you something it was never simply that. There was always a reason underneath it, something they wanted from you or something they wanted to establish about the shape of things between you. I'd learned to read the reason before I accepted anything.

I couldn't find the reason in his face.

"Alright," I said.

He waited in the corridor while I put my shoes on and didn't say anything about how long it took and didn't come into the room without being asked and when I came out and pulled the door closed he simply started walking and left enough space between us that I didn't feel crowded.

We went down the stairs and out through a side door I hadn't used before that opened onto the eastern grounds.

The morning was cold and clear and the territory looked different in full daylight than it had when we arrived in the dark. Larger. The training grounds stretched out to the left, empty at this hour, the equipment arranged with the kind of order that came from a pack that took its preparation seriously. To the right the outer buildings ran in a line along the edge of the forest, storage and workshops and things whose purposes I didn't know yet.

Zeron walked at a pace that matched mine and not his own, which I noticed without commenting

Careful

“The training grounds run from dawn until midday,” he said. “Evening sessions for the senior warriors. If you ever want to watch you’re welcome to. Nobody will bother you.”

I nodded.

“The kitchens are open all day,” he said. “You don’t need to ask permission or explain yourself. You can go in anytime.”

I looked at him.

“The Alpha King’s instruction,” he said simply, and kept walking.

We moved along the eastern path that ran between the pack house and the outer buildings. Pack members passed us occasionally, going about their morning, and every one of them acknowledged Zeron and most of them looked at me with the particular curiosity of people who had heard something and were trying to fit what they’d heard to what they were seeing. None of them said anything. None of them stared beyond the first glance.

“They know who I am?” I said.

It came out before I decided to say it. I wasn’t used to speaking without thinking first and I braced slightly after the words were out.

Zeron didn’t look at me like the question was strange.

“They know you arrived with the Alpha King,” he said. “They know you’re his guest. Beyond that he hasn’t said anything formally yet.”

“But they’ve worked out more than that.”

“Packs talk,” he said. “Yes.”

I appreciated that he didn’t dress it up.

We reached the far end of the eastern path where it curved toward the tree line and the oldest part of the territory. The trees here were enormous, the kind that had been growing for longer than any wolf currently alive and knew it. I stopped and looked at them without meaning to.

“You can walk in there,” Zeron said. “The forest is safe inside our borders. Warriors patrol the perimeter but the interior is open.”

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 39

Careful observation–2

1 filed that away.

He answered every question I asked without making me feel foolish for not knowing things. Where the medical room was and how to reach Sera if I needed her. Which parts of the pack house were common areas and which were private. How meals worked and what the expectations were around them. He gave me information the way someone gave directions, practically and without judgment, and he didn’t volunteer more than I asked for which I appreciated more than I could have explained.

But I was careful.

I was careful in the same way I was always careful with people who were kind to me, which was to say I kept the part of me that assessed things running at the same pace it always ran and I didn’t let the ease of his manner turn it off. I’d known people in Ashcrest who were kind on the surface. The pack member who used to leave extra bread near the kitchen entrance where I might find it and then told Maren what I’d taken. The warrior who’d spoken to me gently in the yard once and the next day stood and watched without expression while Rodan made a point of me in front of the whole pack.

Kindness had conditions attached to it in my experience. It came with a cost that wasn’t always named upfront. The naming came later, when you’d already accepted the kindness and the cost was due and you had no leverage left.

I didn’t know yet what Zeron’s cost was.

Maybe there wasn’t one. Maybe he was simply a man who had been told by his king to show a girl around the grounds and was doing it with basic human decency because that was who he was. That was possible. I understood that it was possible.

I just didn’t know how to believe it yet.

We circled back toward the pack house and he pointed out a few more things along the way, a small garden at the southern corner of the grounds that someone clearly kept with care, a covered walkway between two of the outer buildings that was warmer than the open path on cold mornings, a water source near the eastern tree line that was cleaner than the one near the main building.

At the side door he stopped.

“If you have questions about anything,” he said, “you can ask me. I’m not difficult to find.”

I looked at him.

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“Why are you being helpful?” I said.

It came out more direct than I intended. In Ashcrest that question would have cost me something. I waited for his face to change.

It didn’t change.

“Because you’re the Alpha King’s mate,” he said. “And because you came from somewhere that clearly didn’t treat you the way a person should be treated. And because those two things together mean that making you feel welcome here is something worth doing.” He paused. “There’s no other reason.”

I looked at him for a moment longer.

Then I nodded and went inside.

1 stood in the corridor after the door closed behind me and I thought about what he’d said and I turned it over the way I turned everything over, looking for the part that was going to cost me something.

I didn’t find it.

That didn’t mean it wasn’t there. It just meant I hadn’t found it yet.

I went back upstairs to my room and I sat by the window and I looked out at the eastern forest and I thought about a man who had answered my questions without making me feel small for asking them and had said there was no other reason with the particular plainness of someone who was telling the truth.

Maybe he was.

I didn’t know yet.

But I was starting to think that this place operated by different rules than the ones I knew and that learning those rules was going to take longer than a day and require more than one person being decent to me before I believed it was real.

That was alright.

I had time.

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The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 40

Before thought

(Caius)

It happened in the library.

Three days after we returned from Ashcrest Isla had started moving through the pack house with a little more ease. Not much. She still mapped every room before she settled in it and she still kept her back to walls where she could and she still ate carefully and not enough at the main table. But she was moving. Exploring in the quiet way she did everything, a little further each day, like she was testing the edges of how much space she was allowed to take up.

She hadn't heard me come in. She was standing at the shelves along the far wall looking at the books with the particular expression she had when she was interested in something but wasn't sure yet whether being interested was permitted. I watched her from the doorway for a moment before I crossed to the table near the window. By the time I reached it she'd turned and seen me and her expression had shifted into the more careful version she wore when she knew she was being observed.

"You can take any of them," I said, nodding at the shelves.

She looked at the books and then back at me.

"Any of them," I said again, because I could see she wasn't sure I meant it.

She turned back to the shelves. I went to the table where I'd left a document Pryor had given me that morning, the latest report from the Ashcrest investigation, picked it up and read through it standing up. We were in the same room without either of us making it into something that needed to be navigated and that was progress of a kind I hadn't been sure would come this quickly.

When I finished reading I set the document down and reached past her for the pen I'd left on the shelf beside her.

She flinched.

Not a small movement. Her whole body went in one direction, away from my arm, fast and without any decision behind it, the pure automatic response of someone whose nervous system had been trained by years of things coming at them from the side. She caught herself almost immediately, went still, and I saw the moment she realised what she'd done. The particular expression that followed told me everything, something between embarrassment and the bracing of someone waiting to find out what the flinch was going to cost them.

I stopped.

Before thought

Did not finish reaching for the pen. Did not move toward her or away from her. Simply stopped with my arm where it was for one second, then brought it back, took one step back, put space between

She said nothing either.

We were both still for a moment that was longer than it needed to be and shorter than it felt.

Then I reached for the pen again, from a different angle this time, making sure she could see exactly where my arm was going before it moved. Picked it up. Stepped back to the table. Made a note on the document. Did not look at her while I did it because looking at her in that moment felt like one more thing pressing in on her.

After a minute she turned back to the shelves.

After another minute she took a book.

I stayed at the table until I'd finished making my notes. Then I told her the evening meal was in an hour if she wanted it and I left the library and walked back to my office and closed the door behind

She flinched, Vorak said the moment the door was closed..

'I know,' I said. 'I was there.'

'From us,' he said. 'She flinched from us."

'She flinched from an arm that came toward her without warning, I said. 'That arm has hurt her before. Ours hasn't. She doesn't know the difference yet.'

Vorak went quiet for a moment. Not the quiet of acceptance. The quiet of something large sitting very still because moving wasn't going to help anything right now and he knew it even if he didn't like it.

‘She will, he said finally.

‘Yes, I said. ‘She will.’

I sat down at my desk and put both hands flat on the surface and breathed. Eight years of ruling had required patience in situations that demanded it and I had built that patience deliberately, the same way I’d built everything else, through necessity and through understanding that the alternative was always worse.

This required more of it than anything had before.

She had flinched from my arm. Not because of anything I’d done. The flinch had nothing to do with me specifically and everything to do with what had been done to her since childhood by people who had moved their arms in her direction for reasons that were never good. Her body had learned what an arm coming toward it meant. The fact that this particular arm had no intention of hurting her was information her nervous system hadn’t yet received and couldn’t simply be told.

You couldn’t tell a body something like that.

You had to show it, repeatedly and over time, until the evidence accumulated into something the body believed. Until every arm that came toward her had come and gone without pain/often enough that the response changed. That was going to take time.

‘How much time?‘ Vorak asked.

‘As much as she needs,‘ I said.

He didn’t argue with that. He understood it even if the waiting cost him something.

She came to the evening meal. Ate slightly more than usual. I noted that without commenting on it and kept the conversation at the table away from anything that required her to participate if she didn’t want to.

Later, alone in my office, I thought about the list.

Not for the first time that day. The list had become a fixed point I returned to regularly, not because I needed to review it but because it grounded something in me that needed grounding.

Every person on it had contributed to the girl who flinched in my library. Every raised hand, every word used as a weapon, every choice made over her whole life to treat a person as something less than what she was had built the response her body produced when my arm moved toward her from the side.

They had done that.

I was the one watching the result of it.

‘We will deal with them; Vorak said quietly.

‘We will, I said. ‘In time. The right way!‘

‘The thorough way, he said.

‘Yes, I said. ‘The thorough way!

I sat at my desk and looked at the window and let that sit for a while without trying to resolve it or turn it into something more productive than what it was. Just the reality of what had been done and what it looked like up close.

Then I pulled the current border report toward me and went back to work because the territory still needed running. Wraithbone did not stop because its king was sitting in the dark thinking about the way a girl moved away from an arm that wasn’t going to hurt her.

The work was there.

I did it.

The image stayed with me the way certain things stayed, not at the front of my mind but underneath everything else, present and quiet and not going anywhere.

‘She will know,‘ Vorak said, just before I finished. ‘Eventually she will know we would never hurt her

I looked at the window for a moment.

‘That’s the only thing I’m certain of,‘ I said.

Then I went back to work.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 41

No price

(Isla)

He left the library and I stayed where I was.

The book was still in my hands. I hadn't moved since he walked out and I wasn't sure how long I'd been standing there but the light through the window had shifted slightly and the room had gone a shade quieter the way rooms did when the person who carried the most weight in them was no longer present.

I put the book back on the shelf.

Not because I didn't want it. Because I needed something to do with my hands that wasn't standing very still trying to understand what had just happened in this room.

He had reached past me. My body had reacted. He had stepped back, said nothing, adjusted his approach without announcing that he was adjusting it, finished what he came to do and left. Four things. Simple and sequential and none of them had cost me anything and yet I was standing here turning them over like there was something in them I hadn't found yet.

There wasn't. That was the thing I couldn't land on.

There was nothing in it. No hidden layer. No moment where he had noted what my body did and filed it away for later. He had simply responded to what was happening in front of him in the most practical and least damaging way available and then moved on.

I walked to the window and looked out at the grounds.

A few warriors were finishing up a late session on the training yard, moving across the grass toward the outer buildings. The sky above the tree line was going from pale to dark. Normal. Everything out there was just going about its evening and nothing in it knew or cared that I was standing in a library trying to understand a man who kept giving me things without asking for anything back.

That was what I couldn't make fit.

The giving without the asking. Every version of kindness I had known had a structure to it. Something offered, something expected, something eventually due. Even the smallest things. The pack member who'd occasionally left extra food near the kitchen entrance had done it in a way that made sure I knew who left it, which meant it wasn't really about the food. It was about being seen as the person who left it. There was always a reason underneath. Always something the kindness was working toward.

I had been here long enough to be past the point where a reason should still be hidden if there was was one.

Caius had said the room was mine with no price attached. The food appeared outside my door every night and nobody tracked whether I took it. Zeron had shown me the grounds and when I'd asked him directly why he was helping he'd answered directly and then left.

Sera treated my ankle and talked to me like a person and came back two days later and did it again.

None of it had turned into anything yet.

I pressed my hand against the cold glass of the window and looked at my own reflection and thought about that.

The waiting was the exhausting part. Not the place itself. Not the people in it. The constant low level alertness of waiting for the shape of things to shift, for the moment when the room changed and something was required of me that I hadn't agreed to. I'd been doing it since the shack door opened and Caius walked through it and I hadn't been able to stop doing it since because stopping felt like the most dangerous thing I could do.

But the shift wasn't coming.

Every time I braced for it nothing happened. Every time I expected the kindness to turn into something with edges it stayed round. Every time I waited for him specifically to show me the price he'd decided on, some demand that matched the scale of what he'd given, he simply came into the same room as me and existed there without requiring anything and then left.

I didn't have a framework for that.

I had frameworks for cruelty and for transaction and for the particular kind of tolerance that was really just controlled contempt and for silence that meant danger was coming. I didn't have one for a person who was simply near me without agenda.

It made me careful in a different way than I was used to being careful.

Not careful like watching for the next blow. Careful like someone handling something unfamiliar, something that might be valuable, moving slowly because moving fast risked breaking something

I didn't know how to replace.

I turned away from the window.

The library was quiet around me and the shelves were full and the chair by the window had a cushion on it and somewhere down the corridor the pack house was going about its evening and in about an hour there would be food on a table and nobody at that table would ask me to justify how much I took.

I picked the book back up from the shelf.

Opened it. Found the page.

I didn’t know yet what to do with a person who gave without asking. Didn’t know what it meant or what it was building toward or whether the framework I was waiting to find simply didn’t exist here.

But dinner was in an hour.

He would be there.

He wouldn’t mention the library and neither would I and we would sit in the same room again and he would simply be what he had been every other time, present without pressing, near without crowding, there without requiring me to be anything other than whatever I currently was.

1 was starting to think that was just who he was.

I wasn’t ready to believe it yet.

I was starting to think it.

And that thought, small and uncertain as it was, sat differently in my chest than anything had since the shack door opened. Not hope exactly. Something quieter than hope. The first faint suggestion that maybe the framework I kept waiting to find didn’t exist here because it had never been needed.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 42

What it made her

(Caius)

I was still at my desk when Pryor knocked.

It was late. The pack house had gone quiet around me the way it did after a certain hour, that particular settling of a large building when most of the people in it had stopped moving. I’d been working through border reports for the past two hours and the fire in the corner of my office had burned down to something low and steady and I hadn’t bothered to add to it.

Pryor didn’t knock at this hour unless something required it.

“Come in,” I said.

He entered with a folder under his arm, thicker than his usual evening updates, and he set it on my desk without preamble and looked at me with an expression that was as close to unsettled as

Pryor ever allowed himself to get. He was a man who had worked in council for thirty years and had seen most things that could be seen in pack politics and administration and very little moved his face in any direction that wasn't controlled.

His face was not fully controlled right now.

"The first full report from Ashcrest," he said. "It arrived an hour ago. I read it before bringing it to you."

I looked at him.

"All of it," he said simply, and left.

I picked up the folder.

Pryor's work was always thorough. Every finding documented with its source, every claim supported by either a pack record or a witness account or both. Dates. Names. Specific incidents laid out in the plain language of formal investigation. No editorializing. Just fact after fact set down in order, which somehow made it harder to read than anything with emotion in it would have been. Emotion could be argued with. Facts just sat there.

I read from the beginning.

The wolfsbane chain had been Rodan's direct order. I'd known that from Drace's account at Ashcrest. What the report added was the detail I hadn't had yet. The specific date the order was given, four months after Isla's fifteenth birthday, following what the records described as a period of behavioral difficulty. The behavioral difficulty, documented in Rodan's own hand, consisted of crying and one attempt to remove the floor ring with a piece of broken wall board.

What it made her

That was what had warranted a wolfsbane chain on a fifteen year old girl.

Crying. And one attempt to free herself.

I set that page down and moved to the next.

Derek Thorne had not simply failed to intervene. The report was clear on that. He had initiated. A formal written request to Rodan, submitted three weeks before the chain order was given, requesting what he called a containment measure for his daughter on the grounds that her wolfless status was affecting pack morale and his family's standing.

He had used those words. Containment measure.

The language of someone describing a problem with an object, not a person.

His signature was at the bottom of the request. His handwriting. I had seen it at Ashcrest but reading it again here in the full context of everything surrounding it landed differently. He had not been pressured into this. He had not gone along with something Rodan decided. He had asked for it. Weeks before it happened he had sat down and written a formal request for his own daughter to be chained.

I moved to the next page.

Helene Thorne. The report was careful here, the way Pryor was always careful with evidence that was more absence than action. She had not requested the chain. Had not participated in any documented incident of direct abuse. What she had done, consistently and over years, was nothing. The report included a timeline of her movements on the pack land. She had lived within two hundred meters of the shack for five years. There was no record of her ever approaching it. Not once in five years had she walked to the far edge of the land to see her daughter.

Not once.

Maren's section was longer. Seventeen specific incidents documented. All of it was in Maren's own records, the kind a person kept when they believed they were managing a situation correctly and wanted evidence of their competence. Those records were now evidence of something else entirely.

Brent's section I had to read twice.

Not because it was unclear. Because my mind kept trying to reject the specific detail of what had been done by a twenty one year old to a girl who was his blood. The incidents went back further than the shack, back to when she was twelve and he was thirteen and had already understood that she was the one nobody was going to protect.

I set that page face down on the desk.

What it made her

Vera. Drace. Hadoc. Dolin. Torvin. The full pack membership section at the end, name by name

I read to the last page.

Then I set the report down and sat back and looked at the ceiling and sat very still.

‘Caius.’ Vorak’s voice was different from usual. Not the restless pushing he’d been doing since the shack. Something quieter.

‘I know,’ I said.

‘Her father wrote a letter,’ he said.

‘I know.’

‘Requesting a chain. For his own child.’

‘I know, Vorak.’

He went quiet. Some things didn’t need more words.

I looked at the report on my desk.

The weight of it was not in any single page. It was in the accumulation. Each page adding to the one before it until what I was holding was not just a record of individual acts but a complete picture of a system. Designed, maintained, adjusted over time, participated in by enough people that no single person could claim they hadn’t known.

Every member of that pack had known.

I thought about Isla in the library. The book in her hands. The careful way she’d held herself after the flinch, waiting to find out what it was going to cost her.

The person in this report and the person in that library were the same person.

Everything documented in these pages had produced her. Every page had a consequence and the consequences were living down the corridor in a room that was now hers and eating carefully at my table and flinching from arms that came toward her without warning.

‘What do we do with it?’ Vorak asked.

‘We use every page; I said. ‘Every name. Every specific incident. We build the formal case and when the time comes we stand in front of that pack and we read it out loud in full and every person named in it answers for what they did in front of everyone who knew them.”

‘And her father’s letter?’

I looked at the page I’d turned face down.

What it made her

‘That gets read out loud too, I said. ‘In front of everyone.

Vorak said nothing after that.

I picked the report back up and started from the beginning again, this time making notes in the margin, marking what was needed for formal charges, what was needed for the hearing, what was needed for the sentences that would follow.

It took two hours.

When I finished I put the report in the locked drawer of my desk and I sat in the quiet of my office and I thought about a girl who had no idea that everything done to her had been recorded and was now in my possession and was going to be used to take apart every single person responsible.

Then I picked up my pen and kept working.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 43

I was still there

(Isla)

I was in the shack.

Not remembering it. In it. The dirt floor under me and the chain on my ankle and the dark pressing in through the gaps in the walls and Torvin’s boots on the path outside getting closer and I couldn’t move, couldn’t pull the ring from the floor no matter how hard I tried, and the door was opening and it wasn’t Torvin on the other side it was Rodan with his hands behind his back and that particular expression and I knew what came next I had always known what came next and I couldn’t.

I came up out of it fast.

Sitting upright in the bed with my hands in front of me and my heart going at a pace that made thinking difficult and the room around me taking several seconds to become real. The window. The eastern forest dark beyond the glass. The fire burned down to almost nothing in the hearth.

The wardrobe against the wall with the clothes inside it that were mine.

Wraithbone. I was in Wraithbone.

I pressed both hands flat against the mattress and I breathed and I told myself what was true. The shack was ash. The chain was gone. Torvin was in Ashcrest. The ring was under burned ground that I was never going back to.

My hands were shaking.

I was still trying to get my breathing back to something manageable when the knock came at the door. Two knocks, the same as always.

“Isla.” Sera’s voice, low and calm. “I heard you. Can I come in?”

I looked at the door.

“Yes,” I said. My voice came out rough and smaller than I wanted it to.

She came in with a lamp already lit, which meant she’d been awake or had woken fast, and she crossed to the chair near the bed and sat down and looked at me in the direct assessing way she had and didn’t say anything immediately. Just looked. Checking.

“I’m alright,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “You will be.”

She stayed. Didn’t reach for me, didn’t try to fix anything, just sat in the chair with the lamp on the

I was still there table beside her and let the room be what it needed to be. After a few minutes my breathing had evened out and my hands had mostly stopped and the dream had receded to the place where dreams went when the waking world had fully reasserted itself.

Then I heard footsteps in the corridor.

Not Torvin’s. I knew that immediately and the knowing settled something in me that the breathing hadn’t quite finished settling. These were the footsteps I’d learned in the library, in the dining room, in the corridors of this pack house over the past days. Heavier than anyone else in the building.

Unhurried.

They stopped outside my door.

Sera looked at the door and then at me.

“Do you want him to go?” she said quietly.

I thought about it. I looked at the door and I thought about the fact that he was on the other side of it and had not knocked and had not spoken and was simply there and I understood that he was going to stay there or go, whichever I wanted, and was waiting to find out which that was.

“No,” I said.

Sera stood and opened the door and said something to him I couldn’t hear and then slipped out past him and pulled the door to but not fully closed and her footsteps went down the corridor toward her own room.

“I’m outside,” he said. His voice came through the gap in the door, low and even. “You don’t have to open it. I’m just here.”

I looked at the gap in the door.

“Alright,” I said.

I heard him settle. The sound of him sitting down against the wall outside, the slight shift of weight, and then nothing. Just his presence on the other side of the wood, steady and quiet and not going anywhere.

I lay back against the pillows and looked at the ceiling.

He started talking.

Not about anything specific. Not about me or the dream or Ashcrest or any of the things that lived in the part of my mind the nightmare had come from. He talked about the territory. About a family of deer that had established themselves in the northern section of the forest near the border and that his warriors kept reporting on because they’d never had deer that close to the pack land

I was still there before and nobody could agree on whether they should be moved or left alone. He talked about a dispute between two pack members over the use of a workshop that had been going on for three weeks and had escalated to the point where Zeron had physically separated them twice. He talked about a section of the eastern fence line that kept needing repair no matter how many times it was fixed and that he was beginning to suspect had something structural wrong with it rather than anything on the surface.

His voice was the same as it always was. Controlled and even and without performance in it. He wasn’t talking to soothe me. He was just talking, filling the space on the other side of the door with something ordinary and present and real, and the ordinariness of it was the thing that worked when nothing else might have.

I listened.

My breathing settled the rest of the way. The remnants of the dream, the dirt floor and Rodan's expression and the ring that wouldn't move, receded further with each sentence he spoke until they were where they belonged, behind the waking world and not in front of it.

My hands were still.

I looked at the ceiling and I thought about the fact that he was sitting on the floor in the corridor outside my door in the middle of the night talking about deer and a workshop dispute and a fence line because I had woken screaming and he had come and had not asked to be let in and was not going to ask.

He didn't ask what I'd dreamed.

I didn't tell him.

There was a version of this where someone would have asked. Where the asking would have been dressed up as concern but would really have been the need to know, the need to have access to the specific contents of what was mine, the need to turn even the worst moments into something they were part of. I'd known people like that.

He talked about the fence line for another few minutes and then he went quiet and the quiet was the same as his presence, just there, not demanding anything from it.

"You can go back to your quarters," I said. "I'm alright."

A pause.

"Are you sure?" he said.

"Yes."

Another pause. Then the sound of him getting up from the floor, unhurried, and his footsteps moving a few steps down the corridor.

"I'm going to leave the door as it is," he said. "Sera's room is two doors down. If you need anything else."

"I'll find it if I need to," I said.

A beat of silence.

"Goodnight, Isla," he said.

"Goodnight," I said.

His footsteps moved away down the corridor and I lay in the quiet of my room and looked at the ceiling and listened to the pack house settle around me and thought about a man who had sat on a floor outside my door in the middle of the night and talked about deer until my hands stopped shaking and had then asked once if I was sure and left when I said I was.

The dream was still there at the edges of things.

But it was smaller than it had been before.

closed my eyes.

This time sleep came without the waiting.

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The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 44

Unlock its ok 4

The path is set

(Caius)

I walked back to my quarters and closed the door behind me.

I stood in the dark and said nothing and let Vorak do what he was going to do because there was no stopping him and fighting it would only make both of us worse.

He was pushing hard.

Not the slow grinding pressure he'd maintained since the shack. This was sharper More directed.

The particular kind of pushing that came when he felt something had gone wrong and wanted to fix it and couldn't and was making me aware of that at full volume.

'We should go back, he said.

'No,' I said.

'She was screaming, Caius.'

‘I know.‘

‘She’s alone in there.‘

‘She needed the space,‘ I said. ‘So I gave it to her.‘

He pushed again and I let it move through me without responding to it and after a moment it eased back slightly. Not gone. Just contained, the way a fire was contained when you stopped feeding it without putting it out.

I put my fist through the wall.

Not a decision. My hand was in the plaster before I’d registered I was going to move and the wall gave and the pain arrived immediately, real and grounding, pulling everything to a single physical point.

I stood there for a moment.

Then I pulled my hand out and looked at it.

The knuckles were split and two of them had already started to colour. The healing warmth moved through almost immediately, the particular sensation of a wolf’s body doing what it was built to do. Within minutes the splits were closing. Within the hour there would be nothing left to show.

‘Feel better?‘ Vorak asked.

The path is set ‘No,‘ I said.

‘No,’ he agreed.

I closed my hand and opened it and watched the last of the damage disappear and then I crossed to the window and looked out at the territory in the dark.

The training grounds were empty. The tree line of the eastern forest was visible from here and stood and looked at it and thought about the fact that she could see the same trees from her window on the other side of the pack house. Different angle. Same forest. We were on opposite ends of the building looking at the same thing and I was standing here with a healing hand and a hole in the wall behind me and she was hopefully, finally, asleep.

‘She’s still going back there when she closes her eyes, Vorak said. His voice had lost the pushing quality. It was quieter now. More like thinking out loud.

‘I know,‘ I said.

‘The shack is ash. The chain is gone. Torvin is in Ashcrest under investigation. And she’s still there in her sleep.’

That’s not something a burned shack fixes,‘ I said. ‘That’s something time fixes. And evidence.

Consistent evidence that the world she’s in now operates differently from the one she came from.

‘We’re providing that.‘

‘We’re starting to, I said. ‘It’s been days, Vorak. Not months. Not years. Days.’

He was quiet for a moment.

‘It costs something,‘ he said. ‘Watching her and not being able to fix it faster.’

‘Yes, I said. ‘It does.‘

‘Every time she flinches. Every time she eats like someone is going to take the food away. Every time she waits for something bad to happen and it doesn’t and she still can’t fully believe it won’t.

‘Every time, I said. ‘That’s what this is. That’s what it costs.

He went quiet after that. The frustrated energy was still there but it had changed shape, from pushing outward to something more internal, the kind of quiet that came from understanding something you didn’t want to have to understand.

I turned away from the window.

The report from Ashcrest was locked in my desk downstairs. Every page. Every name. I’d read it twice and made my notes and locked it away and the contents of it were sitting in me the way they

The path is set had been since Pryor set the folder on my desk and looked at me with that expression and said all of it and left.

That report was the source of what she dreamed.

Not directly. Not in the way that a single event was a source. In the accumulated way, page after page of decisions made about her by people who had the power to make them, building something in her over years that now lived in her sleep and woke her screaming in a room that was warm and safe and hers.

I was going to use every page of it.

When the time came and the case was complete and Isla was ready I was going to take it back to

Ashcrest and stand in the yard where she had been whipped and read it out loud in full in front of every wolf who had been there. Every name. Every specific incident. Every signature at the bottom of every request.

Her father's letter included.

That day was coming and the work of making sure it was done correctly and completely and in a way that could not be undone was the most important thing currently on my desk and I was going to give it everything it required.

'And then?' Vorak asked.

'Then the sentences,' I said. 'Then the exiles. Then the shack's ruins left behind and us on the road back here.'

'And her?'

I looked at the window again. At the eastern forest in the dark.

'She'll be there, I said. 'Riding beside me. Not behind me.'

Vorak settled.

Not fully satisfied. But settled in the way he settled when he understood that the thing he wanted was coming and the path to it was being walked correctly even if it was slower than he wanted it to be.

I sat on the edge of the bed and looked at the wall opposite and thought about everything that still needed to be done and then I lay back and closed my eyes.

Sleep took longer than it usually did.

But it came.

The path is set

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 45

The stillness

(Isla)

I woke before the sun came up.

My body had been doing it since before I could remember. In the shack it had been necessary. The hour before Torvin arrived was the only part of the day that belonged to no one else and I had learned to use it. The habit had followed me here even though the reason for it hadn't and I lay in the bed and looked at the ceiling and listened to the pack house breathe around me.

His voice was still in my head.

Not the words exactly. More the quality of it. The steadiness of his voice on the other side of the door while my hands were still shaking. The fact that he stayed without being asked to and left without being asked to and the space between those two things had been exactly what I needed.

I didn't know what to do with that either.

I got up.

Not because I needed to. Because lying still when I was already awake felt like something I hadn't learned yet. My body wanted to move and my hands wanted to be doing something and the room, comfortable as it was, felt smaller when I was just existing in it without purpose.

My ankle was stiff the way it was every morning. The wolfsbane damage didn't disappear overnight and Sera had told me it would take time, that the skin needed consistent treatment and rest to heal properly and that rushing around on it before it was ready would only slow the process down. I slipped on the slippers beside the bed and took the stairs one at a time and by the time I reached the bottom the stiffness had eased to something manageable the way it usually did once I'd been moving for a few minutes.

The kitchen was already occupied when I pushed the door open. Dena, who ran the kitchen with the quiet authority of someone who had been doing it for a long time, looked up when I came in. The younger staff member beside her looked up too.

Both of them went still for just a moment in the way people went still when something unexpected walked through their door.

"Can I help?" I said.

Dena's expression moved through something quickly, not unkindness, more the careful calculation of a woman who understood exactly what her position required of her.

“You’re the Alpha King’s mate,” she said. Not harshly. Just plainly. “This kitchen is not your

The stillness responsibility.”

“I want to work,” I said. “I’m used to working. I don’t know what to do with myself when I’m not.”

She looked at me for a long moment. I could see her weighing it, the genuine request against the very clear reality of what would happen if Caius walked into his kitchen and found his mate cutting vegetables at dawn.

“I understand,” she said carefully. “And I mean no disrespect when I say this. But if the Alpha King found you in here doing my staff’s work I would have a very difficult morning. Please./Go and rest.”

She said it gently. Without making me feel foolish. But the answer was not going to change and we both knew it.

I nodded and stepped back out into the corridor.

1 stood there for a moment with the kitchen door closed behind me and the pack house quiet around me and the particular restlessness of a body that had been trained for years to be doing something at this hour pressing in from every direction.

Sera appeared at the end of the corridor. She was wearing the expression of someone who had woken early for her own reasons and was mildly surprised to find company. She looked at me standing outside the kitchen door and then down at my ankle and back up at my face.

“You’re up early,” she said.

“I always am,” I said.

She looked at me for a moment and then nodded toward the small room off the corridor.

“Come and have tea,” she said.

I followed her in and she made tea and we sat across from each other and she looked at me the way she always looked at me, like she was reading something she hadn’t finished yet.

“What’s wrong?” she said.

I told her what happened.

Sera was quiet for a moment. Not the quiet of someone searching for the right thing to say. The quiet of a healer recognising something she had seen before in a different form.

“Dena was right to turn you away,” she said. “Not because your wanting to work was wrong.

Because putting you to work in that kitchen would have put her in a very difficult position with the Alpha King and she knew it.”

“I know,” I said. “I understood that.”

“But it doesn’t fix the problem,” Sera said.

“No,” I said.

She looked at me carefully.

“What you’re feeling is normal,” she said. “For someone who has spent years in a situation where doing was the only thing that kept bad things from happening the absence of doing feels like danger. Your body hasn’t learned yet that the danger is gone. That’s not a character flaw. That’s what prolonged stress does to a person and it takes time to undo.”

I looked at my hands around the cup.

“It feels like waiting for a punishment that hasn’t arrived yet,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “And the only thing that closes that gap is time and evidence. Every morning you wake up here and nothing bad happens is evidence. Every meal that arrives without you having to earn it is evidence. Your body will catch up eventually. You can’t rush it.”

She looked pointedly at my ankle.

“Same principle applies down there,” she said. “You can’t rush that either.”

I looked at my ankle and said nothing.

“Is there anything I’m actually allowed to do?” I said.

Sera looked at me for a moment.

“You have the phone,” she said. “You know how to use it now. When the mornings feel too long put something on. There is a television in the main sitting room too, you can use it whenever you want.

Nobody is going to question what you watch or how long you sit there.” She paused. “The library is there. The grounds when your ankle allows it. Zeron will take you riding when you’re cleared for it.

You can sit with me some mornings if you want company. None of it requires you to earn anything. Your place here is already yours.”

I nodded slowly.

That was not the answer I’d been hoping for. But it was an honest one and Sera was not a person who softened things beyond what was useful and I was starting to value that about her.

I finished my tea.

I went back upstairs carefully, one step at a time, and sat by the window and watched the eastern forest come into the light and thought about a man who had sat in the dark and asked for nothing and left when I told him to and had apparently been doing that kind of thing all along without anyone needing to tell him to.

The stillness pressed in around me.

I let it.

It was the hardest thing I’d done since arriving here.

But I let it.