

# The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

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## Stay out of sight

(Isla) Luna Maren found me before I had even finished the breakfast dishes. I heard her before I saw her, the sound of her footsteps coming through the pack house toward the kitchen, quicker than usual. That alone was enough to make me set down the pot I was holding and turn around and wait with my hands at my sides and my eyes down. She stopped in the kitchen doorway and looked at me the way she always looked at me when she had something to say that she was going to enjoy saying. "Leave that," she said, nodding at the dishes. "I need you to listen carefully." I said nothing. Listening carefully was the only safe response when Maren spoke to me in that tone. "The Alpha King arrives today," she said. "You already know that. What you are going to do is go directly to your shack, stay inside, and not come out for any reason until Torvin comes to tell you the visit is over. You will not be seen. You will not make a sound. You will not exist today. Do you understand me." "Yes," I said. "If I find out you were anywhere near the pack house or the training yard or anywhere on these grounds while he is here, what happened yesterday morning will feel like nothing." She let that sit for a moment. "Nothing, Isla." I kept my eyes down. "I understand." "Go now," she said. "Before anyone is up and moving." I went. The morning air was cold when I stepped outside, colder than the day before, the kind of cold that meant the season was turning. I crossed the pack grounds with my head down and my feet moving fast, not running because running drew attention, but close to it. The grounds were mostly empty at this hour, just a few wolves heading to the training yard for early drills, and none of them looked at me. They rarely did unless they wanted something. I reached my shack at the far edge of the land and pushed the door open and went inside. Torvin arrived less than ten minutes later. Earlier than he had ever come. He did not say anything when he came through the door, just crouched down and clicked the wolfsbane chain around my ankle with the practiced speed of a man who had done it thousands of times, which he had. The burn settled in immediately the way it always did, not as bad as the first few years, not something I had gotten used to exactly, more something I had learned to live alongside. He stood up and left without a word and pulled the door shut behind him. I sat down on the floor and put my back against the wall and looked at the four walls around me. The shack was one room. That was all it had ever been. The dirt floor, the rotting walls, the blanket in the corner. In the far end sat a cracked toilet bowl that had not flushed properly in over a year. The handle was broken and the tank behind it cracked through the middle. When I had water from the barrel outside I could pour it in and force a flush. Most days I did not have enough water for that. Most days I used it anyway and waited until I had enough water to deal with what was left behind. The smell was something I had learned to live with the same way I had learned to live with everything else in this shack, by deciding I had no other choice. I had one set of clothes that were officially mine, the ones I was wearing. A shirt that had been washed so many times the fabric had gone almost see through in places and trousers that were too large at the waist and held up with a piece of cord. Everything else I had collected quietly over the years, worn things that pack members had thrown out or left behind. A second shirt with a torn collar that I kept folded under my blanket.

Two pairs of undergarments that were not much more than scraps at this point but I kept them washed and dried as best I could. Pads I stole from the pack house bathroom whenever I had the chance, slipping one or two at a time into my waistband and walking out without looking like anything had happened. I had learned to take small amounts spread over many visits so nobody noticed anything missing. I kept a small stash hidden in the corner of the shack behind a loose piece of wall board. Those days every month when my cycle came were hard enough without having nothing at all and I had made sure for years that I would never be caught without them. Washing myself was something I did with the barrel water when there was enough of it, which was not always. I would wet a cloth and go over what I could reach and call it done. My hair I washed the same way, bent over the barrel outside on the mornings Torvin was late and I had a few minutes before the chain went on. It was never clean the way clean was supposed to feel. It was just less dirty than it had been. I had a toothbrush. Worn down to almost nothing, the bristles splayed out in every direction. The toothpaste I had taken from the pack house bathroom in small amounts when nobody was watching, pressing my finger into the tube and scraping out what I could and tucking the half empty tube into my waistband and walking out like I had not done anything. I did it carefully and not too often because getting caught stealing anything, even something that small, would have brought consequences I did not want to think about. These were the details of my life. I did not think about them much anymore. Thinking about them led nowhere useful. You either endured what you were given or you broke under it and I had made my choice about that a long time ago. The shack was quiet. It was always quiet out here, far enough from the pack house that the normal sounds of pack life did not carry. Sometimes I could hear faint voices or the sounds of training if the wind was right but mostly what I heard was the forest, birds, wind moving through the trees, the occasional sound of something moving in the undergrowth beyond the tree line. Today even that felt different. Everything felt like it was waiting. I had been thinking about the arrival of the Alpha King. Not constantly. I did not have the space in a day to think about things that did not affect my immediate survival. But in the moments between tasks, in the few minutes before sleep came, my mind had gone to him without me choosing it. Caius Blackthorn. I had never seen him. Had no idea what he looked like. But I had been hearing his name my whole life the way you hear thunder, something distant that meant something large was moving somewhere out there. The stories the pack told about him were not the kind people told with admiration exactly. They were the kind told with a particular kind of fear, the kind that came with a drop in the voice and eyes that went to the door afterward as if saying the name too loudly might somehow bring it here. He had become Alpha King at twenty. The youngest in recorded history. The wolf he took the title from had been Alpha King for thirty years and was said to be the most dangerous wolf alive at the time. Had been. Packs did not fight him anymore. That was what the older warriors said when they talked about him late at night in the pack house when they thought no one was listening. You did not fight him. You assessed the situation and you understood that fighting was not an option and you made your peace with that and you hoped he had no reason to look too closely at you. Rodan had given him a reason. I did not know what that meant for our pack and I was not sure I cared. Whatever happened between Rodan and the Alpha King was not something I would be any part of. I was in the shack. I was chained. I was invisible the way Maren wanted me to be and the way the pack had always wanted me to be and today of all days that suited me fine. I shifted against the wall and stretched my legs out in front of me. The chain clinked when I moved. It always did. I had stopped hearing it most of the time the way you stop hearing a sound that is always there. Time passed in the way it always did in the shack. I had no way to measure it beyond the light coming through the c\*\*\*k in the wall to my left. When I had first been put here I used to trace the movement of that thin line of light across the floor to track the hours. I still did it sometimes without meaning to, an old habit. The light was still low and pale. Mid morning at most. And then I heard it. Not a sound exactly. More like an absence of sound. The pack grounds, even at a distance, always carried a low level of noise. Voices, movement, the rhythm of a pack going about its day. It was something I had stopped consciously registering years

ago, the same way I had stopped consciously registering the chain, but it was always there and I always knew it without knowing I knew it. It stopped. Not gradually. All at once, like something had reached out and pressed a hand over the mouth of the whole pack at the same time. I had never heard it go that quiet before. Not ever. Not for a storm, not for a fight, not for anything. My back went straight against the wall. He was here. I could not hear anything specific, no voices, no hoofbeats, nothing that told me where on the grounds he was or how many men he had brought. Just that silence, total and complete, spreading out across the pack land like something that had weight to it. I thought about Maren's face this morning. The way she had spoken. The particular urgency underneath her usual control. She was afraid. I had seen Maren afraid before but not like that. Not the kind of afraid that made her move fast and speak in low voices before the sun was fully up. Whatever the Alpha King was, whatever he represented, even the people who held every power in my world were small in front of him. I pressed my back harder against the wall and pulled my knees up and looked at the door. It would not open. There was no reason for it to open. I was invisible, the way I had always been, the way they needed me to be today more than any other day. Nobody was coming to this shack. Nobody ever came here except Torvin and he had already been. I told myself that. I looked at the door and I told myself that and I listened to the silence that had swallowed the whole pack whole and I waited.