The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 8

The day he found me

(Isla) Time moved the way it always did in the shack when there was nothing to do but wait. In long stretches that felt the same from one end to the other, no markers, no breaks, just the slow crawl of light across the dirt floor and the sound of the forest outside and the weight of the chain around my ankle. The silence over the pack grounds had not fully lifted. It had eased slightly, the way a room eases after something frightening passes through it, but the normal sounds of pack life had not come back the way they usually did.

No training yard noise. No voices carrying across the grounds. Whatever the Alpha King's presence had done to the pack it had not worn off yet. I had used the toilet twice since Torvin left. The second time I had enough water left in the small bucket near the wall to pour into the tank and force a weak flush. It was not enough to clear everything but it was better than leaving it. I set the empty bucket back against the wall and went back to my corner and sat down again.

I was hungry. That was not new. I was almost always hungry by this point in the day. Maren had sent me out before I finished the breakfast dishes which meant I had not eaten yet and the chances of anyone remembering to bring food to the shack while the Alpha King was on the grounds were not worth thinking about. I had half a bread roll from two days ago wrapped in a piece of cloth behind my blanket. I considered it and decided to leave it. There was no way of knowing how long I would be in here and half a roll now was worse than half a roll later if later turned into tomorrow.

I pulled my knees up and rested my arms across them and looked at the c***k in the wall to my left. The line of light coming through it had moved. Past mid morning now. Closer to midday. I wondered what was happening in the pack house. Whether Rodan was sitting across from the Alpha King right now and what that looked like. Whether Maren was standing somewhere nearby with her hands folded and her face arranged the way she arranged it when she needed to perform composure for an audience.

Whether my father was in the room or whether he had been told to stay out of sight the way I had been told to stay out of sight. The difference was that I was used to it. I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the wall and tried to think about nothing, which was a skill I had gotten reasonably good at over the years. Not sleep, not exactly, just a kind of stillness where you let your mind go blank and you stopped trying to get through the day and just existed in the current moment without looking at anything ahead of it or behind it.

I was almost there when I heard it. Footsteps. I opened my eyes. They were coming from the direction of the pack house, moving across the grounds toward the far edge of the land

where my shack sat. I heard them clearly in the quiet that had settled over everything. The ground out here was packed dirt and dry leaves and footsteps carried further than people expected if they had not spent years listening to every sound from inside four walls. I knew Torvin's footsteps.

I had been listening to them for five years, every morning and every night, the particular weight and rhythm of them. The way his left foot landed slightly harder than his right. The pace he kept, not fast, not slow, the pace of a man doing a job he had done so many times it required no thought. These were not Torvin's footsteps. These were heavier. Each one landing with a weight that Torvin's did not have, the kind of weight that came from a body built differently, larger, more solid.

The pace was different too. Not the rhythm of habit. Measured. Like someone who was paying attention to where they were going and what they were looking for. I sat up straight. They were getting closer. I moved back into the corner of the shack, the corner furthest from the door, and pulled my knees up to my chest and put my back against the wall. The chain clinked when I moved and I went still immediately and listened to hear if the footsteps reacted to the sound.

They did not slow down. They did not stop. They kept coming, steady and even, cutting across the far edge of the grounds in a straight line toward my shack like whoever was walking knew exactly where they were going. Nobody came to this shack. That was the point of it being out here. Torvin and occasionally Maren when she wanted to deliver something personally and the rare times Rodan came to make a point. Nobody else. Pack members did not come this far out of their way for no reason.

There was nothing out here worth coming to. My mouth had gone dry. The footsteps stopped just outside the door. I stared at the door. It was old wood, warped and badly fitted in its frame, with a gap along the bottom wide enough to see a strip of daylight under it and the shadow of two feet standing just on the other side. They stood there. Not moving. Not speaking. Not doing anything, just standing there, and the stillness of it was somehow worse than if they had simply opened it immediately.

It gave me too much time to think about who was on the other side and why they were here and what it meant that the footsteps had not belonged to Torvin or to anyone else I recognized. I pressed my back harder into the corner. The door opened. The light that came in was the first thing. The doorway had always been dark when it was closed, just the c***k at the bottom and the gaps in the walls, so when the door swung open the daylight came in all at once and I had to look away from it for a second before my eyes adjusted.

Then I looked at the man standing in the doorway and everything in my body went completely still. He was enormous. Not just tall, though he was very tall, taller than Rodan, taller than any wolf I had seen up close, but built in a way that made the doorframe look smaller than it was. Dark hair. Dark eyes that were already on me before I had finished looking at him. A face that gave nothing away, not surprise, not disgust, not

the particular expression people usually had when they looked at me in this shack, the one that sat somewhere between pity and relief that they were not me.

He just looked at me. And I looked back at him because I did not know what else to do and because something about the way he was standing in that doorway, completely still, not moving toward me, not speaking, not doing anything except looking, made it impossible to look away. I did not know his face. I had never seen him before in my life. But I knew, the way you knew things sometimes without being able to explain how, that the man filling my doorway and looking at me with those dark unreadable eyes was not a warrior and not a pack member and not anyone who belonged to Ashcrest.

I knew exactly who he was. And I had absolutely no idea what was going to happen next.

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Chapter 9

The King's Mate–2

Claim

She was young. I registered that first. Young and thin in a way that was not natural, the kind of thin that came from being fed too little over too long a period. Her shirt was torn at the back and through the tear I could see the marks. Old ones, raised and pale, running across her back in lines that told me exactly what had put them there. And newer ones, not fully healed, sitting on top of the old.

My eyes went to her ankle.

A chain. Bolted to a ring in the floor. The skin around it was raw where the wolfsbane in the metal had been burning her. Not enough to incapacitate her fully. Enough to keep her weak. Ènough to keep her from running. Whoever had designed this had known exactly what they were doing and had done it with care, which was the part that sat in my chest like something cold.

She had not moved since I stepped inside. She was watching me with those eyes, waiting, and I understood that she was doing what she had learned to do in this room, which was to be still and wait and try to survive whatever came through the door.

I stood in the doorway and looked at her and she looked back at me.

And then it hit me.

There was no other way to describe it because nothing in my life had given me a word for it before this moment. It was not a feeling that built gradually or announced itself before

arriving. It arrived all at once, like walking into a wall in the dark, like the ground dropping away under your feet, like every nerve in my body reorienting toward a single point at the same time without asking me whether I wanted that to happen.

The mate bond.

I had known it existed. Every wolf knew it existed. I had gone eight years as Alpha King without feeling it and had privately concluded that it was either a thing that happened to other people or a thing that would come in its own time and I had no particular feelings about either possibility. I had a territory to run and a crown to maintain and I had never had room for it.

I had room for nothing else right now.

I stood completely still.

The girl in the corner was still watching me. She had not moved. She did not know what had just happened to me and that was the only clear thought I had available to me in this moment because everything else was being occupied by the bond, by the reality of it, by the fact that the person it was pulling me toward was sitting on a dirt floor in a rotting shack with wolfsbane burns on her ankle and whip marks on her back and the expression of someone who had forgotten that the world contained anything other than pain.

My mate.

Claim

Chained to the floor of a shack at the edge of a pack that I was going to take apart piece by piece before I left this territory.

I did not move toward her. She was already afraid and moving toward her would make it worse and I was aware enough of what the bond was doing to me to know that I needed to be careful right now. I needed to be in control of myself in a way that was going to require more effort than anything I had required of myself in eight years of ruling.

I looked at her.

She looked back at me.

I breathed in and I breathed out and I did not move and I did not speak and I let the bond do what it was doing and I stood there in the doorway of the worst room I had ever walked into and I looked at the girl who was mine and I made myself stay still.

For now.

Just for now.

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

Chapter 10

Claim

The silence between us

(Isla)

He did not move.

That was the first thing I noticed after the initial shock of the light and the size of him settled enough for me to think at all. He was standing in the doorway and he was not moving, not coming in, not reaching for me, not doing anything except looking at me with those dark eyes that I could not read no matter how hard I tried.

I had been looked at in this shack before. Rodan looked at me the way someone looked at something they owned and were satisfied with the condition of. Maren looked at me the way someone looked at something they found unpleasant but useful. My father looked at me when he had to and stopped as quickly as he could. Brent looked at me when he wanted to remind himself that there was someone below him.

This man was not looking at me any of those ways.

I could not figure out what way he was looking at me and that alone was enough to keep me frozen in the corner with my back against the wall and my knees to my chest. The things I could not predict were always the most dangerous. Rodan in a predictable mood was survivable. Rodan when something had shifted in him that I had not seen coming was when the worst things happened.

I did not know this man. I did not know his moods or his patterns or what the wrong movement or the wrong sound would cost me.

I dropped my eyes to the floor.

That was the right thing to do. It was always the right thing to do when you did not know what was coming. You made yourself smaller, you took your eyes down, you waited, and you let whoever was in the room make the first move and you responded to that instead of giving them a reason to act before they had decided to.

The silence stretched out between us and I counted my own breathing to keep myself from doing anything that would draw attention. In and out. In and out. As quiet as I could make it.

He still did not move.

The seconds kept passing and he kept standing in the doorway without speaking and without moving and I did not understand it. Every person who had ever come through that door had done something within the first few seconds of being inside it. There was no precedent in my experience for someone who simply stood and looked and did nothing else.

I risked a glance up.

He was still watching me. His face had not changed. Whatever that expression was it had been there from the moment the door opened and it was still there now, this unreadable thing that I could not put a name

The silence between us

Claim te, and his eyes were on me with a focus that I felt the same way you felt heat from a fire before you were close enough to be burned by it.

I put my eyes back down

My hands were pressed flat against the wall behind me. I was aware of every point where my body was in contact with something. I pressed harder into the wall like it might have something useful to offer and waited for him to do what people did when they came in here.

He did not do any of those things.

He took a breath instead.

It was not a sound most people would have noticed. A slight change in the air of the room, an intake that was more controlled than natural breathing, like someone choosing to breathe rather than just breathing. I noticed it because I had spent years in a small room learning to read the sounds of people who were deciding things.

And then he spoke.

“How long have you been in here.”

His voice was quiet. That was the first thing about it. Not soft, quiet was a different thing entirely, quiet was a choice, the choice to keep something contained, and the control in it was so complete that it made the words land harder than if he had shouted them. It was the voice of someone who was managing themselves very carefully and the fact that he needed to manage himself at all made the back of my neck go cold in a way that Rodan’s loudest moments never had.

I had heard angry men shout. I had heard Rodan's voice go cold the way it did right before something bad happened. I had heard Maren's particular tone that meant she had decided something and it was not going to go well for me.

I had never heard anything like this. This was something different. Contained the way a fire was contained before it was let out and not after.

I did not answer him.

Not because I was choosing not to. Because my voice had gone somewhere I could not immediately access and the question itself had surprised me. Nobody who came into this shack asked me questions. They told me things. They did things. They did not ask.

"Look at me," he said.

The same quiet. The same control.

I looked up.

His eyes were already on mine and the moment I met them something happened that I had no name for, something that moved through me from the top of my head down to the chain around my ankle, not pain, not fear, something that I had never felt before and could not describe and did not know what to do with.

Claim theld his gaze because he had told me to and because looking away felt suddenly like something I was not capable of.

"How long," he said again

I opened my mouth. Closed it. Tried again.

"Five years," I said.

My voice came out smaller than I intended. Rougher. I had not spoken much today and it showed.

He said nothing for a moment. He just looked at me with that expression I still could not read and I watched something move through his eyes that was there and gone before I could catch what it was.

Then he turned his head slightly without taking his eyes fully off me and said one word through the open doorway behind him.

"Zeron."