

The Alpha King And His Chosen Luna

C 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.