

Chapter 18

The United Packs Council chamber was everything Nova had imagined and nothing she was afraid of.

High ceilings. Dark wood. Seven council seats arranged in a deliberate arc — the kind of architecture designed to make the person standing in the center feel small. Tall windows let in pale morning light that didn't quite reach the floor.

Nova had dressed deliberately. Not the server's uniform. Not the soft clothes she wore around the boys. A dark blazer she'd bought three years ago for a job interview and kept because it made her feel like herself on difficult days. Clean lines. No pack insignia — she didn't have one and she wasn't going to pretend.

She walked in beside Jax and she did not look at the floor.

Four council members rose when Jax entered. Three did not.

She noted which three.

They were seated at the far end of the arc. Elder Crane — silver-haired and expressionless. Elder Foss — younger, sharper eyes. And Elder Marsh — the one whose letter had used the word **unverified**. He was already looking at her the way men like him looked at women like her. Cataloguing. Dismissing. Moving on.

She looked back at him until he glanced away.

Jax opened the proceedings with the DNA results — submitted, verified, entered into official record. Ryder Wilder and Blake Wilder, sons of Alpha King Jax Wilder and Nova Ellis. The council clerk read the names aloud.



It was the first time she'd heard their full names spoken in an official room.

Something settled in her chest like a stone finding the bottom.

Elder Crane leaned forward.

"The council appreciates the Alpha King's transparency in this matter," he said. His voice was precisely calibrated — warm enough to be civil, cool enough to make clear he was doing them a favor. "However, the question before us today is not paternity. It is pack standing." He looked at Nova. "Miss Ellis."

"Ellis," she said.

"You have no registered pack affiliation."

"Correct."

"You have no family line on record with the United Packs registry."

"My mother was an unaffiliated omega. I grew up outside any pack structure." She kept her voice neutral. "This is all in the documentation Jax submitted."

Crane's expression didn't change. "An unaffiliated omega carrying the heirs to the Alpha King's throne creates a — structural concern."

"What kind of concern?" she said.

He blinked slightly. He hadn't expected her to ask. People who stood in this room and felt small didn't ask follow-up questions.

"The legitimacy of the bloodline—"



"Is verified," she said. "You just confirmed the DNA results. My sons are Jax Wilder's sons. That's the bloodline question." She tilted her head. "What you actually mean is that you're concerned about *my* bloodline. That I don't have the right name or the right family or the right lineage to stand next to the Alpha King."

Silence.

Elder Marsh's jaw tightened.

"The council's concern," he said, "is that the Alpha King's mate — should this proceed — reflects the dignity of the United Packs—"

"I raised two alpha heirs alone for three years," Nova said. "With no pack, no family money, two jobs, and the kind of tired that doesn't go away. They are healthy and bright and kind and Ryder can already tell you the difference between twelve species of dinosaurs." She let that land for exactly one second. "If that's not dignity, then I don't know what word you're using."

Elder Foss made a sound — almost a laugh, quickly controlled.

Nova looked at all three dissenting members in turn.

"I understand what this is," she said. "I'm not the kind of omega you planned for. I didn't come from the right pack or the right family and I didn't sit quietly in the right places. I know that." She paused. "But my sons are the future of this throne whether the council finds that convenient or not. And I am their mother. I will be in every room they walk into for the rest of their lives, with or without the council's approval. " She looked at Marsh directly. "So the question isn't whether I belong here. I'm already here. The question is whether you're going to be useful or just loud."



The room was completely silent.

Beside her, she felt Jax go very still.

Crane looked at her for a long, measuring moment.

"The Alpha King wishes to formally register his intended mate?" he asked finally. To Jax, not to her.

"He does," Jax said.

Crane looked at Nova again.

"Nova Ellis," he said. "Intended mate of Alpha King Jax Wilder. Mother of the Wilder heirs." He paused. "The council notes her registration."

It wasn't an endorsement. It wasn't warmth. But it was official, entered into the record, and three dissenting members could not do anything about it today.

Nova held Crane's gaze until he looked away.

They filed out forty minutes later. The hallway outside the chamber was quiet — staff moving at a distance, security flanking them without crowding.

Jax said nothing until they reached the elevator.

Then he turned to look at her.

"*Whether you're going to be useful or just loud,*" he said.

She looked up at him. "Too much?"

"It was perfect." His voice was low. Something moved in his eyes —



pride, she thought, though it sat underneath something warmer. "You were perfect."

"I was angry," she said. "Anger makes me articulate."

"I've noticed." The elevator opened. "Since September of freshman year."
"

She stepped inside.

She was quiet for a moment.

"Ryder can't actually name twelve dinosaurs," she said. "It's more like eight."

Jax's laugh — real, unguarded, unexpected — filled the elevator.

She looked straight ahead and did not smile.

She smiled the entire ride up.

The council had noted her registration.

By nightfall, every pack in the United territory would know her name.

By morning, the reactions would come — from pack members, from press, from the people who'd spent years deciding she wasn't worth remembering.

None of that was what mattered.

*What mattered was that downstairs, in a penthouse with glow stars and cereal on the counter, two little boys were about to find out the world



knew their names.*

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