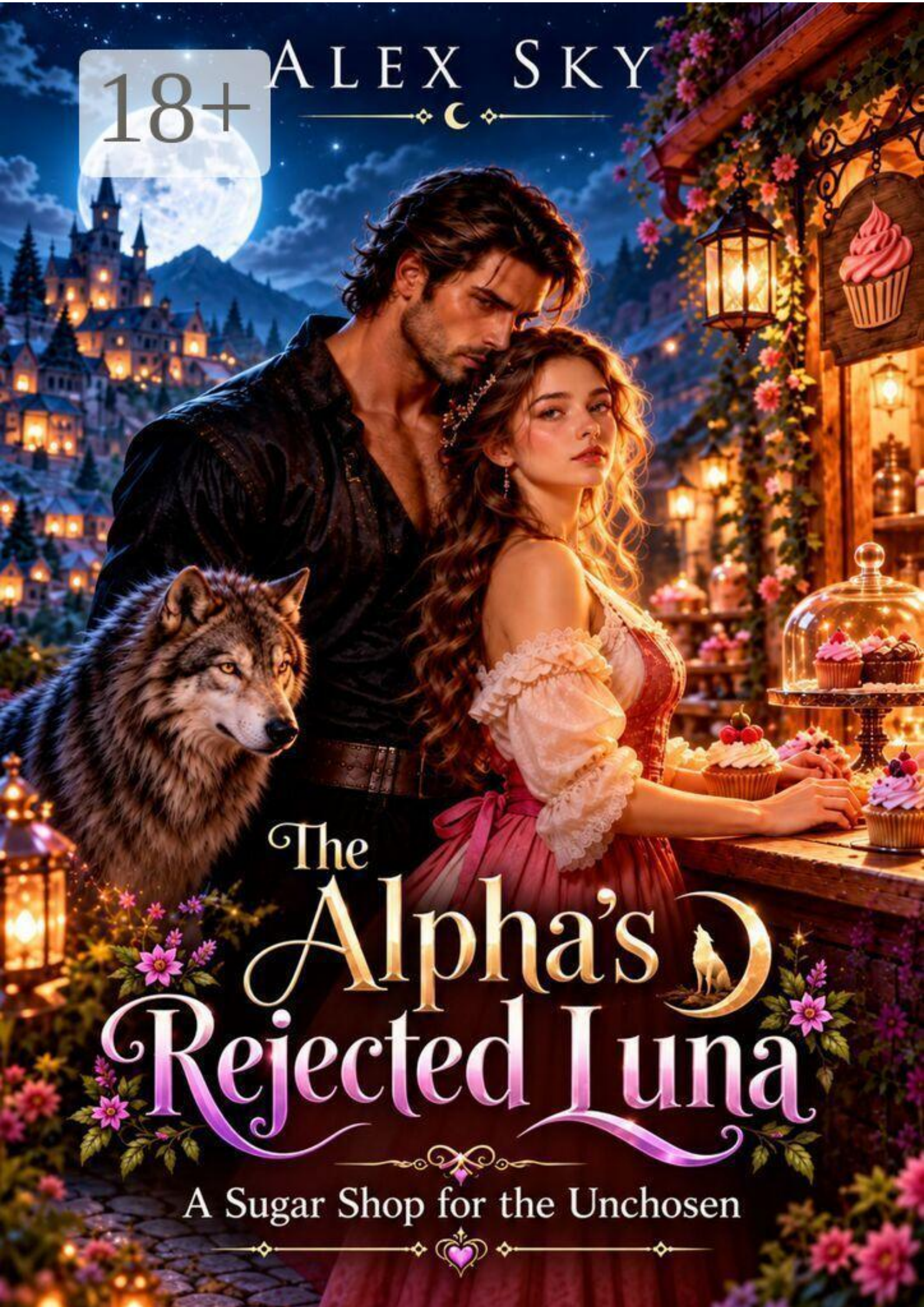
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ALEX SKY
The Alpha's Rejected Luna
A Sugar Shop for the Unchosen

Alex Sky

The Alpha's Rejected Luna. A Sugar Shop for the Unchosen

«Издательские решения»

Sky A.

The Alpha's Rejected Luna. A Sugar Shop for the Unchosen / A. Sky — «Издательские решения»,

Rejected before her entire pack, Mira Velesova loses her title, her home, and the man she trusted. All she is given is an abandoned sugar shop — one that wakes for children the pack has cast aside. As old magic reveals forged oaths and erased names, Mira must choose whether to reclaim her old place or build a new kind of home where no one is unwanted.

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The Alpha's Rejected Luna
A Sugar Shop for the Unchosen

Alex Sky

Перевод AI-based translation tool ChatGPT

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The Alpha's Rejected Luna: A Sugar Shop for the Unchosen

Alex Sky
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Chapter 1. Rejected Before the Entire Pack

Mira Velesova realized their love was over not when Arsen spoke her name in an icy voice.

Not even when the elders led her into the center of the Moon Circle like a criminal, though that very morning she had awakened in the pack's main house as his Luna, his lawful wife.

Their love ended the moment she looked up at her husband and saw that he wasn't looking at her.

He was looking past her shoulder.

At the pack. At the council. At the men standing beside stone bowls filled with Moonfire. At the women in silver veils. At everyone waiting for the Alpha's decision, already trying to guess what it would be.

Everyone except his own wife.

"Mira Velesova," Arsen Gradov said.

A whisper rippled around the circle.

Not "my Luna."

Not "my wife."

Not even simply "Mira."

A stranger with a stranger's surname, someone who could be placed on twelve black stones before the ancient oak and discussed as though only a week ago these same people hadn't watched her pour tea for them at the communal table.

Mira straightened.

The silver dress she had chosen for the Renewal celebration was too thin for the night cold. The delicate embroidery on the sleeves snagged against her fingers. She wanted to hide her hands in the folds of the fabric, but she forced them to rest calmly at her sides.

Yesterday she had stood here beside Arsen.

Today she stood opposite him.

The entire pack lay between them.

"Do you know why you've been summoned?" he asked.

He was using his ruler's voice. Even, heavy, accustomed to silence following every word.

Once, Mira had known another voice.

That one had murmured against her temple, "Sleep. I'm home."

That one had gone hoarse with laughter the day she ruined his favorite moon-shaped rolls and somehow managed to cover not only the kitchen but the Alpha of the Northern Pack himself in flour.

But that man had not come here tonight.

"I wasn't summoned to be asked anything," Mira said. "I was summoned to hear my sentence."

Someone in the crowd drew a sharp breath.

Arsen narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Sentences are passed on the guilty. I'm giving you a chance to speak."

"Then ask me."

At last, he looked directly at her.

She had waited all week for that look.

She wished she hadn't.

Arsen's gray eyes were closed to her like the gates of the main house to an outsider. There was no rage in them. No hatred. Not even disappointment.

Only the cold certainty of a man who had already been told where the truth lay.

"Do you deny using funds from the Luna's treasury without my knowledge?"

"I do."

"Three orders bear your personal seal."

Mira didn't blink.

There it was.

At last, something more than rumor. More than hints. More than conversations that stopped the moment she entered the room.

"I didn't sign them."

Varg Roun, Arsen's adviser, stood to his right holding a narrow silver tablet. His face remained perfectly composed.

"The seal belongs to you, Lady Velesova."

"It also belonged to me three days ago, when someone left a treasury ledger on my desk that had never been there before."

Arsen frowned.

"You said the ledger wasn't yours."

"Because it wasn't."

"The treasurer confirmed the entries."

That was when Mira felt the blow.

Not Varg.

Not the council.

Arsen had checked.

He hadn't simply believed the first accusation. He hadn't merely listened to Varg and decided to rid himself of an inconvenient wife.

He had looked for proof.

And someone had given him exactly the proof he needed.

It didn't make the hurt any easier.

Quite the opposite.

"Who delivered the ledger to the treasurer?" Mira asked.

This time Varg answered.

"It was submitted to the council office according to established procedure."

"By whom?"

"All documents will be presented after the Circle reaches its decision."

Mira looked at him.

"How convenient."

"This is not the place to accuse the council."

"But it's the perfect place to accuse the Luna?"

Another whisper moved through the crowd.

Varg's fingers tightened almost imperceptibly around the tablet.

Arsen said, "Mira."

She turned to him.

"I'm asking you, not Varg. Did you see the documents?"

"I did."

"My seal?"

"Yes."

"And that was enough?"

Arsen paused.

"Not only that."

"What else?"

"The treasury records matched."

"They were checked by people from the council."

"The treasurer serves the pack, not Varg."

"And who appoints the treasurer?"

Arsen's jaw tightened.

The answer was too obvious.

Mira breathed out softly.

"There. You see?"

"What exactly am I supposed to see?"

"That you investigated me from inside the same system that's accusing me."

"You expect me to suspect everyone?"

"No. I wanted you, just once, to remember that among all the possibilities, my innocence was one of them."

He recoiled — not with his body, but with his eyes.

For one moment.

Barely.

But she saw it.

"I gave you three days to explain yourself."

"No, Arsen. You gave me three days to confess."

"I asked questions."

"You asked them as though the answer was already lying in front of you."

"There was evidence."

"There were papers."

"From where I stood, they were verified."

Mira nodded.

"And from where I stood, three years beside you should have verified something too."

Silence fell.

Not ceremonial silence.

Not the kind authority creates.

An awkward, human silence in which people suddenly realized they hadn't gathered merely to witness an inquiry.

They were watching a marriage collapse.

Mira let her gaze travel around the circle.

Familiar faces.

Matvey the baker, whose daughter she had helped enroll in the school attached to the main house.

Dara, whose roof Mira had helped repair after the spring downpour.

Old Visena, who had brought her apples during her first month in the pack because "a new Luna has to get used to our sour varieties."

Young wolves who didn't dare raise their eyes.

Women drawing their children closer.

For three years Mira had learned how to become one of these people.

Now not one of them stepped forward.

She didn't know which hurt more: their silence or the fact that she understood it.

Varg lowered his eyes to the silver tablet.

"Alpha, the pack is waiting for your decision."

Mira turned to him.

"Of course. We wouldn't want the pack to wait too long."

"Watch your words."

"And you should watch the seals."

"Mira," Arsen snapped.

This time, without her surname.

Her name hurt more.

That was how he used to say it in the mornings.

After long council meetings.

Laughing in the kitchen, covered in flour, when she first tried to bake his favorite rolls herself.

The memory came and went.

An Alpha stood before her now.

If the husband still existed somewhere inside him, he had been silent for far too long.

"Say it," Mira said.

Arsen frowned.

"What?"

"You've already made your decision. Don't make me stand here while you search for words that will let you feel better about it."

"I can still — "

"No."

For the first time that evening, he stopped because she had stopped him.

Mira lifted her chin.

"I understand now. You aren't looking for the truth. You've already chosen what you're willing to call the truth."

"That's not what happened."

"Then postpone the Circle."

A murmur ran through the crowd.

Mira continued.

"Order an investigation outside Varg's office. Find out who had access to my seal. Who brought in the ledger. Who prepared those orders. Who first decided they were mine."

Arsen said nothing.

"Do it now," she said.

Varg cut in.

"The law does not provide for suspending a Circle once certified evidence has been — "

"I'm speaking to the Alpha."

"The council is required to ensure proper procedure."

"And the Alpha is required to think for himself."

Arsen went pale.

"Careful."

"Are you the Alpha of the Northern Pack, or the secretary of your own council?"

Something changed on Varg's face for the first time.

Not anger.

Attention.

As if Mira had accidentally touched a place he preferred to keep hidden from other eyes.

Arsen took a step forward.

The flames in the bowls swayed.

"Do you think this is easy for me?"

Mira looked at him.

"No."

He clearly hadn't expected that answer.

"I think this is hard for you," she continued. "I think you've spent the whole week convincing yourself that you're doing what has to be done. That you're protecting the pack. That a good Alpha must choose order even when it hurts him."

Arsen remained silent.

"And do you know the worst part?" she asked. "I even believe that you believe it."

His fists clenched.

"Then what are you accusing me of?"

"Of choosing the system you were taught to trust over the woman you actually know."

Varg began, "Alpha — "

"Quiet," Arsen said sharply.

The adviser fell silent.

For the first time all evening.

Mira felt something almost like satisfaction.

Almost.

But it changed nothing.

"Say it," she repeated. "Your pack is waiting."

Arsen stood motionless for several heartbeats.

Then he straightened.

And Mira knew at once.

Now.

"I, Arsen Gradov, Alpha of the Northern Pack, strip Mira Velesova of the mark of my Luna."

One of the women sobbed.

Mira didn't turn her head.

"From this hour forward, she no longer has the right to speak in the name of the pack, wield the seal of the main house, or enter it as its mistress."

He stopped.

Only for a moment.

"Or call herself my Luna."

Varg lowered the silver tablet into the cold flame of one of the bowls.

Lines of ancient law appeared across the metal.

"The banished is granted one day to collect her belongings," he announced. "She may take personal possessions that do not bear the pack's seal. Property belonging to the main house remains with the house."

Banished.

Such a surprisingly light word.

So small for everything it took away.

But the worst had happened earlier.

Arsen had believed them instead of her.

Everything else was paperwork.

"The council also grants Mira Velesova the old sugar shop near the eastern edge of the settlement," Varg continued. "For temporary use. As a gesture of respect for her former position."

A different sort of whisper moved through the crowd.

The sugar shop.

Mira knew it only from stories. It had been closed for years, standing almost at the edge of the settlement where the old storehouses gave way to the forest road. Children sometimes played on its porch until adults frightened them away with tales of its collapsing roof.

How generous.

A ruin in exchange for the main house.

Evelina Roun stood behind the council women in a pale cloak. Her expression held exactly the degree of sympathy that could not technically be called inappropriate.

"A merciful decision," she said.

Mira looked at her.

"Would you like the key now, Evelina? Or will you wait until I've at least scrubbed the floor?"

Someone coughed to hide a laugh.

Evelina's smile didn't slip.

"I only meant that they left you a roof."

"Then today must be a great festival of generosity for the council."

"Enough," Arsen said.

Mira turned her head.

"Yes."

She raised her hands to her neck.

"Enough."

The silver chain resisted at first.

For three years, the small round medallion engraved with a wolf's silhouette had rested against her heart.

Arsen had fastened it around her neck himself on their wedding day.

His fingers had trembled then.

Just a little.

He'd laughed and made her promise never to tell anyone, or the young warriors would stop being afraid of him.

She had kept his secret.

She would keep it even now.

Mira walked to the Alpha's stone and placed the medallion on its edge.

She didn't throw it.

Didn't fling it down.

Wouldn't give anyone the chance to call it the hysteria of a banished woman later.

She simply set it there.

"I came to this pack with no family standing behind me," she said. "But I did not come empty-handed. I gave it my work, my loyalty, and a home where your children were never afraid to ask for one more piece of pie. I took neither your silver, nor your bread, nor your honor."

She looked at the people.

Then at Arsen.

This time he didn't look away.

Finally.

"A home doesn't fall apart when its Luna walks out. It falls apart when a lie is allowed to remain inside."

No one answered.

Varg went perfectly still.

Evelina lowered her eyes.

Arsen stared at the medallion.

Mira didn't wait to see whether he would pick it up.

She turned away.

The crowd parted before her.

At the edge of the Moon Circle, someone said softly, "Lady Mira…"

Dara.

She held her little daughter against her and couldn't quite bring herself to take a step forward. Her lips were trembling.

"I'm sorry…"

"Don't be."

Mira looked at the child.

"Take care of the little ones."

Then she walked toward the main house.

* * *

Her suitcase was already waiting in the hall.

Small.

Humiliatingly small for three years of life.

Two servants stood near the staircase.

Both looked away.

Mira stopped in front of the suitcase.

"Who packed it?"

One of them swallowed.

"The council ordered your belongings inspected."

"My letters?"

"They've been left in the Alpha's study until the inquiry is concluded."

"My books?"

"Anything without a personal ownership mark belongs to the house."

"The walnut box?"

The servant hesitated.

"It contained jewelry bearing the pack's seal."

Mira nodded.

Not because she agreed.

Because she understood: while she had stood in the Moon Circle, strangers' hands had already opened her drawers.

Touched her ribbons.

Sorted through her letters.

Decided which memories belonged to the woman and which belonged to the position she had just lost.

"Wonderful," she said. "So the council can move quickly when women's wardrobes are involved."

The second servant flushed.

Mira picked up the suitcase.

Only then did she look around.

The great hall smelled of wax, oak, and the dried herbs used to polish the floors. For three years, that scent had meant home.

Portraits of former Alphas and Lunas lined the walls beside the staircase.

Mira knew nearly every face.

During the first year of her marriage, when she still had no idea how to be Luna to a pack that had never been hers, she sometimes spoke to those women in her thoughts.

She asked one for patience.

Another for strength.

A third for the ability to smile at the elders in a way that did not mean agreement.

Now their darkened faces watched in silence as yet another woman left the main house.

Mira's gaze moved slowly along the row.

Something caught at her attention.

There was slightly more bare wall between two portraits than the arrangement required. Perhaps another painting had once hung there. Or perhaps the artist had simply chosen to leave the space.

She had never noticed it before.

Tonight, she noticed everything.

Yarina was waiting at the foot of the stairs.

The old housekeeper was thin and straight as a winter branch. She held a gray wool cloak in her hands.

"Take this."

Mira looked at it.

"Was this inspected too?"

"It's mine."

And somehow that almost made Mira cry.

Tonight she had been granted a day to leave "out of mercy," a ruined shop "out of respect," and a suitcase after an inventory.

The cloak was the first thing anyone had offered simply because it was cold outside.

"Thank you."

Yarina draped the wool over her shoulders herself.

"The eastern edge is cruel at night."

"They could punish you for this."

"I'm too old to be afraid of kitchen duty."

For the first time that evening, Mira smiled.

Just a little.

"Then the kitchen should be afraid of you."

Yarina's lips twitched.

She glanced around, then quickly pressed a small copper key into Mira's palm.

It was dark with age, heavy, with a crescent-shaped bow.

"For the shop?"

"For the shop."

The metal was warm.

Mira frowned.

"Why do you have it?"

"Because the council didn't know where to look."

"And you did?"

"My mother did."

Yarina lowered her voice.

"The old sugar shop didn't only bake things to sell."

"Then who did it bake for?"

"The moon children."

Mira frowned.

"The what?"

But a door slammed upstairs.

Evelina was descending the staircase.

She had removed her ceremonial cloak. Her pale hair was tied back with a simple ribbon, and she carried a silver candlestick in one hand.

Without the council insignia, she looked almost at home.

Far too much at home for a woman who didn't live here.

"Yarina," she said. "They're looking for you in the kitchen."

The housekeeper inclined her head.

"I'll be there shortly."

Evelina stopped several steps above them.

Her gaze moved over the cloak, the suitcase, Mira's closed hand.

"Are you really leaving now?"

"Were you hoping to see me off in the morning?"

"I don't wish you any harm."

Perfectly said.

Too perfectly.

"Then we've both been extraordinarily unlucky tonight."

Evelina's smile barely changed.

"You turn everything into an attack."

"A useful skill today."

"Arsen did what he had to do."

Mira studied her more closely.

That sounded different — not triumphant, but certain.

As if Evelina had long ago decided what choices a man ought to make.

"Does believing that make it easier for you?"

"Does calling yourself a victim make it easier for you?"

"No. Nothing is easier for me tonight."

Mira bent toward the suitcase.

"Do you think he'll regret it?" Evelina asked.

Mira stopped.

There it was: the first, tiny mistake.

Not "Do you hope he will?"

Not "Do you think he might?"

Evelina was thinking about Arsen.

About whether he would regret it.

Too personally.

Mira slowly straightened.

"You really want me to keep thinking about him."

"You loved him. Everyone saw it."

"And?"

"It must hurt when a man chooses the pack over a woman."

Mira met her eyes.

"It hurts more when a woman waits for someone else to fall because she has no other way to rise."

Evelina stopped smiling.

A man's voice sounded from the upper landing.

"Evelina."

She turned sharply.

Arsen stood at the railing.

No cloak.

No Alpha's insignia on his chest.

Only a dark shirt with the collar undone and the face of a man who had finally been left alone with the consequences of his own decision.

He held the Luna's silver medallion in one hand.

"Leave us."

Evelina froze.

"I only wanted — "

"Leave."

She passed Mira in silence.

Yarina stepped back as well.

"Stay," Mira said.

Arsen looked at the housekeeper.

He didn't object.

He came down the stairs.

For the first time that evening, the entire pack was no longer standing between him and Mira.

Somehow that made everything heavier.

"Don't leave tonight," he said.

Mira almost laughed.

"That's why you came?"
"The eastern edge isn't safe."
"Strange concern after banishing me."
"I didn't mean to humiliate you."
There it was.
Not "I'm sorry."
Not "I was wrong."
I didn't mean to.
Mira felt tired.
Deeply, crushingly tired.
"But you did."
Arsen tightened his grip around the medallion.
"I saw your seal on those documents."
"I know."
"The treasurer confirmed the records."
"The investigation went through the council."
"I didn't know I was supposed to suspect my own council."
"But suspecting me was easier?"
He fell silent.
Good.
Let him try to answer that for himself.
"I can't overturn the Circle's decision without a new hearing."
"Can't you?"
"The law — "
"I didn't ask about the law."
Arsen looked at her heavily.
"If I reverse the decision now without proof, half the elders will say the Alpha is protecting his wife."
"So you're afraid of looking weak."
"I'm afraid of splitting the pack."
"But you weren't afraid of splitting me."
The words stopped him.
Mira held his gaze.
Let at least one thing remain with him after tonight.
Arsen looked at the suitcase.
"Why is there so little?"
"Your council decided it was enough for a banished woman."
Anger flashed across his face.
Real anger.
"I never ordered them to touch your personal belongings."
"But you let them decide what belonged to me."
"I'll return the letters."
"Don't."
"Mira…"
"I wanted you to believe me when it mattered. Not return my letters afterward."
He took a step toward her.
Mira didn't retreat.
But Arsen stopped himself.
"I'll send men to the shop. The roof, windows, and stove need to be checked."

"Don't send anyone."
"No one's lived there in twenty years."
"All the better."
"This isn't a joke."
"I'm not laughing."
His voice hardened.
"There are sometimes tracks from outsiders near the eastern edge."
"I'm told there are fewer councilmen there."
Pain flickered across Arsen's face.
"Do you want me to beg?"
Mira looked at him.
"No, Arsen. I wanted you to believe me."
Silence.
Now he truly had nothing to say.
Mira lifted the suitcase.
Arsen exhaled.
"Then what do you want?"
She stopped.
Good question.
That morning, she could have made a list.
A home.
A name.
His hand beside hers.
The truth.
Her place.
Now all of it suddenly felt like someone else's belongings in someone else's wardrobe.
"I don't know yet."
Unexpectedly, Arsen nodded.
"Neither do I."
The first honest admission of the evening.
And somehow it almost hurt more than everything else.
Mira looked away.
"Then figure it out."
She walked toward the door.
"Mira."
"What?"
"If you leave now, there will be no way back."
She stopped on the threshold.
And still, she turned around.
"Do you really think I'm the one who closed the door?"
Arsen didn't answer.
Mira left.
* * *
The night greeted her with wind, wet earth, and distant howling beyond the hills.
Yarina caught up with her on the porch and pushed a small candle stub in a glass cup into her hand.
"Take the road past the old mill to the eastern edge."
"Why?"
The housekeeper looked toward the dark road.

"Don't go past the guard kennels. Varg's men are there."

Mira remembered that.

"And the shop?"

"Say your name."

"What?"

"It will open if you say your name."

Mira looked at the copper key.

"At least they haven't taken my name from me yet."

"Then guard it well."

The main house fell behind her.

This time, Mira didn't look back.

The suitcase pulled at her arm. Stones slipped beneath her boots. The hem of her dress caught on bushes.

Yarina's gray cloak kept out the wind, but not the feeling that the entire settlement was watching her go.

Faces really did appear in the windows.

Behind one, a curtain was quickly pulled shut.

At another, a woman pressed a hand to her mouth.

Not one door opened.

Mira wasn't angry yet.

She knew this pack too well.

Fear lived here not in laws, but in habit.

Don't argue with the council.

Don't ask the Alpha uncomfortable questions.

Don't approach someone who has already been declared guilty.

For three years, Mira had tried to fight that habit gently.

With pies after meetings.

Seats at the communal table.

Conversations.

Requests.

Tonight, for the first time, she wondered whether gentleness only worked when someone stood beside it, ready to say a firm no when it mattered.

The wind grew stronger near the old mill.

Its black wheel had not turned in years. The moon hung above it like a silver coin no one had bothered to pick up.

Mira didn't stop.

The past had already taken enough of tonight.

Beyond the mill, the houses grew sparse.

Old storehouses.

Empty barns.

Crooked fences.

The eastern edge had always been a place for things — and people — that couldn't find a place closer to the square.

Somewhere here stood the council's latest mercy.

The sugar shop.

Mira saw it around the bend.

And stopped.

The sign hung crooked from a single chain.

Once, it had shown a crescent moon above a mound of sugar. Now the paint had peeled away until the moon looked like a broken claw.

The windows were filmed with thick gray grime.

Moss grew across the front step.

The little chimney over the roof was so thin it looked as though the stove had long ago forgotten what smoke was for.

"As a gesture of respect for my former position," Mira said aloud.

The empty street offered no comment.

She climbed onto the porch.

A board groaned under her foot.

Mira set down the suitcase and took out the key.

Only then did she notice the tiny words engraved into its bow.

For the one who lets them in.

She traced the letters with a fingertip.

Not "for the owner."

Not "for the Luna."

Not "for the lawful holder."

For the one who lets them in.

A strange condition for a door.

"All right," Mira said. "Let's start by letting me in."

The key slid into the lock.

But it wouldn't turn.

She tried again.

Nothing.

"Perfect. Even a ruin has decided I've received more than enough generosity for one day."

Mira was about to force the key when she remembered Yarina's words.

Say your name.

Ridiculous.

Then again, ordinary human decisions had not exactly distinguished themselves tonight.

She removed one glove and placed her palm against the door.

The wood was warm.

Mira froze.

Not warmed by the sun — the night had long since stolen the day's heat.

Alive.

As though something beat slowly inside the old boards, something she had not yet been allowed to hear.

She closed her eyes.

"I'm Mira Velesova," she said. "No longer Luna of the Northern Pack. No longer mistress of the main house. Just Mira. And I need to come in."

The key turned by itself.

The lock clicked behind the door.

Mira opened her eyes.

"Good. At least someone is listening tonight."

She pushed the door open.

The smell of dust and old wood drifted out from inside, along with something unexpectedly sweet.

Caramel.

Not fresh caramel.

The memory of caramel.

The way an empty kitchen sometimes smells the morning after a celebration, when everything has been eaten, the fire has died, and yet a trace of sugar still lingers in the air.

Mira picked up her suitcase and stepped across the threshold.

Moonlight seeped through the dirty windows and fell in pale stripes across the floor.

The shop was smaller than she had imagined.

But prettier.

Even now.

Carved shelves lined the walls. Most were empty, though a few glass jars with tarnished lids remained. Behind the broad counter stood a door to the kitchen. In one corner sat a round table and two chairs, one overturned.

Mira righted it.

The leg creaked, but held.

"Already more reliable than half of this evening."

Her voice sounded unexpectedly loud.

She ran a hand over the counter.

A thick stripe of dust coated her fingers.

Something on the wall behind the shelves caught her eye.

A faded gray ribbon.

Pinned there with a tiny nail.

Mira stepped closer.

Little wolf paws had been embroidered along the fabric.

Unevenly.

Some larger, some tiny.

Not a pattern.

As though each mark had been stitched by someone different.

She touched one of the paws.

The ribbon was soft.

Someone had once made it with love.

"For the moon children," she remembered Yarina saying.

Mira slowly withdrew her hand.

"Who were you here?"

The shop didn't answer.

Not yet.

Behind the counter she found the kitchen.

The stove took up almost the entire far wall.

Once white, it was now gray with age. A rounded belly, a stone top, a small iron door.

Wooden spoons, paddles, a whisk, and an old sieve hung from the shelves.

Below them sat baking molds.

Stars.

Crescents.

Little houses.

Wolf faces.

Mira picked one up.

The metal was cool.

Two letters had been scratched into the inside.

T. V.

She put the mold back.

Beyond the kitchen was a small room.

A narrow bed.

A chest.

A washstand.

A window overlooking an overgrown yard.

The blanket was gray with dust, but the mattress looked intact.

Home.

A very poor one for now.

But no one here looked past her shoulder.

No one asked whether she had the right to open her own cupboard.

No one said "by the Alpha's mercy."

Mira returned to the shopfront.

"Not a palace," she said. "But at least no one says 'by the Alpha's mercy' every three minutes."

She liked the sound of that.

Almost normal.

As though she could already joke.

As though the evening had not been the end of her life, only a catastrophically inconvenient move.

Mira opened one cupboard.

Empty.

Another.

A few linen bags.

In the third, she found glass jars. One still held large white chunks of sugar.

She took one out.

Smelled it.

Sweet.

Clean.

Far too clean for a place that had been locked for so many years.

"You're a strange one," Mira told the shop.

Then she looked at the stove.

Dry logs lay in a box beside it.

If she meant to spend the night here, she needed to start with warmth.

Mira stacked the wood, found an old flint, and struck a spark.

Nothing.

Again.

And again.

The stove remained dark.

"Not you too," she muttered. "I've had enough conversations with cold things for one day."

She lowered herself onto a stool.

And for the first time all night, she let her shoulders sag.

There was no pack here.

No Varg.

No Evelina.

No Arsen.

No one watching.

No one telling her a Luna had to keep her back straight.

Mira sat before the cold stove and stared at her hands.

A pale line still circled one finger where her ring had been.

She hadn't noticed when they had taken it.

Perhaps at the main house.

Perhaps before the Circle.

What did it matter?

If you leave now, there will be no way back.

Mira closed her eyes.

Tears were close.

But they didn't fall.

Maybe she was too tired even for tears.

"Good," she said into the darkness.

Someone knocked on the door.

Mira's head snapped up.

Once.

A pause.

Then again.

Not the hard blow of a grown man's fist.

Weaker.

She stood.

A wooden spatula lay on the table.

A ridiculous weapon.

But there was nothing else to choose from.

Mira picked it up and walked into the front room.

"Who's there?"

Silence.

"I asked who's there."

A rustle came from outside.

Then a thin voice said, "Don't open it if I'm not allowed."

A child.

Mira pulled the door open.

A boy of seven or eight stood on the porch.

Thin.

Soaked through.

Wearing a jacket far too large for him, clearly borrowed from someone bigger.

Dark hair clung to his forehead. A dirty streak crossed one cheek. His amber-brown wolf eyes looked frightened and angry at the same time.

Mira recognized him.

Not immediately.

"Tim?"

He stepped back.

"I didn't take anything."

"I didn't say you did."

"I only knocked."

"That I did notice."

He looked past her into the dark shop.

Then toward the road.

"Why are you out here alone?"

Tim shrugged one shoulder.

The gesture was far too adult.

"It just happened."

"Nothing just happens at the eastern edge in the middle of the night."

He scowled.

"You're here now too."

"True."

"So it must be allowed."

"My trouble was officially assigned to me tonight. Who gave you permission to wander around after dark?"

Tim looked away.

"No one."

"That's what I thought."

Mira opened the door wider.

"Come in."

The boy didn't move.

"I'm not allowed."

"Who said so?"

He stayed silent.

Mira looked at him more carefully.

His left hand was hidden deep inside his sleeve.

His right hand gripped the edge of his jacket so tightly it seemed the fabric might fall apart if he let go.

"Are you cold?"

"No."

"Wet?"

"No."

"Have you eaten today?"

"Yes."

Too fast.

Mira waited.

Tim pressed his lips together.

"During the day."

"What did you have?"

"I don't remember."

Sometimes a child's lie was funny.

Brazen.

And sometimes it was the kind of lie an adult found easier to believe, because the alternative meant admitting that the child had learned to lie not from mischief, but from necessity.

Mira stepped aside.

"There's almost nothing in the shop yet. But we'll find something."

"I didn't ask."

"And I didn't offer you a bargain. I said come in."

Tim looked toward the road again.

A light flickered in the distance near the mill.

The boy immediately hunched his shoulders.

Now Mira understood.

"Is someone looking for you?"

He didn't answer.

"From home?"

A short shake of the head.

No.

"From the House of the Younger Branches?"

Tim flinched.

Barely.

Answer enough.
Mira slowly extended a hand without touching him.
"I won't send you back there tonight."
He looked first at her palm.
Then at her face.
"You're not the Luna anymore."
The words struck harder than she expected.
Not because they were cruel.
The child said them as a test.
Did she still have any right left to protect anyone?
Mira lowered her hand.
"No. I'm not the Luna anymore."
Tim took a step back.
She added, "But I can still open a door."
He stopped.
"I can give you a roof. I can try to light the stove. I can probably find something edible."
"They'll come anyway."
"Who?"
Silence.
"All right. Don't tell me."
Tim frowned.
"You aren't going to ask?"
"If you want to tell me, you will."
He looked distrustful.
Adults had probably said similar things too many times before demanding answers anyway.
Mira held the door.
"It's dark in there. It's dark out here too, but at least inside it's not raining."
Tim remained on the porch for several more moments.
Then he stepped across the threshold.
Mira closed the door.
* * *
In the kitchen, Tim stopped at once.
He breathed in through his nose.
"It smells like sugar in here."
"You smell it too?"
He nodded.
Mira looked at him.
"So I wasn't imagining it."
Tim walked to the shelf of baking molds.
He touched the little wolf-face mold with one finger.
Then immediately snatched his hand back.
"You can," Mira said.
"What?"
"Touch things. If you're careful."
"At the shelter, you can't."
The word had finally slipped out.
Mira didn't seize on it.
"This isn't a shelter."
"Then what is it?"

She looked around at the dusty walls.

The cold stove.

The bags on the shelf.

The faded ribbon with wolf paws visible through the open doorway.

Her own suitcase.

"I don't know yet."

Tim looked at her.

"You don't know where you're going to live now either?"

The question was so direct that no adult answer came to her.

"Looks that way."

"The Alpha threw you out?"

Mira untied one of the bags of sugar.

"The Alpha decided I'd be more useful here."

Tim snorted.

"Adults always say things like that when they do something bad."

Mira looked at him over the bag.

"Speaking from experience?"

He shut down immediately.

"No."

"I see."

"You don't see anything."

The anger came instantly.

Sharp.

Thin-edged.

"You lived in the main house. You had huge windows. And stairs. And everyone listened to you. Then one time they didn't listen, and now you think you know everything."

He cut himself off.

Frightened.

Not of Mira.

Of having said too much to an adult.

Mira calmly tied the bag closed.

"You're right."

Tim blinked.

"What?"

"There's a lot I don't know."

He looked suspicious.

"Really?"

"Really."

Mira sat on the stool.

"But I can learn. Someday. If you ever want to tell me."

"I don't."

"Then not now."

Tim clearly had no idea what to do with an answer that didn't force him to speak.

He moved toward the stove.

Mira picked up the flint again.

"Let's try one more time."

"It won't light like that."

Mira raised an eyebrow.

"Did the stove tell you personally?"

"No."
He hesitated.
"You can't make old stoves do things."
"What do you do instead?"
"Ask."
"How do you know?"
Tim faltered.
"Lissa knows."
"Lissa?"
The boy immediately bit his lip.
Mira pretended not to be interested anymore.
"All right. How do you ask?"
Tim stepped closer.
When he lifted his left hand toward the stove, his sleeve slipped down.
Mira saw the mark.
Gray.
Uneven.
Like the print of a wolf's paw crossed by a thin curved line.
Tim yanked his sleeve down.
"Don't look."
Mira immediately turned her eyes away.
"All right."
"Everyone looks."
"Then I'll try not to be everyone."
"You already looked."
"Yes."
He pressed the hand against his chest.
"It means I'm bad."
A cold anger rose inside Mira.
Not the anger she had felt in the Circle.
For herself, her anger had burned hot.
For a child, it turned to ice.
"Who told you that?"
"Everyone knows."
"I don't."
"You don't know anything about the Grays."
"Maybe not."
Tim lifted his chin, almost triumphantly.
Mira continued.
"But I know enough to tell you that a mark on your arm does not make a child bad."
"Grays don't stay in homes."
"What do you mean, don't stay?"
"They get sent away."
"To whom?"
He turned away.
"Wherever they're told."
Mira slowly rose.
Tim tensed at once.
She didn't move toward him.

She went to the stove instead.

Mira laid her palm against the cold stone.

"Then listen to me carefully. I don't know who invented that rule. I don't know how many times you've been told that your mark matters more than you do. But no one here is going to call you bad because of a mark."

Tim looked at her.

"You can't stop everyone."

"No. Not everyone."

Mira glanced around.

The old kitchen.

Dusty shelves.

Wolf-shaped baking molds.

The ribbon in the next room.

"But I can stop them here."

He said nothing.

For a long time.

Then quietly, "You have to ask the stove."

"How?"

"Tell it who the warmth is for."

Mira looked at the dark iron door.

Who the warmth is for.

Not command it.

Not force it.

Not give it a title.

She opened the stove.

The logs lay dry and helpless inside.

Mira placed several pieces of sugar beside them. She didn't know why. It simply felt right.

Then she straightened.

"For Tim," she said.

The boy froze.

"Who knocked even though he was afraid."

Silence.

"For a child no one had the right to tell he was bad."

Tim stared into the firebox where there was still no fire.

Mira swallowed.

"For a night too cold to stand alone outside someone's door."

She paused.

"And for me. Because I don't want to freeze anymore in places where I'm not wanted."

Nothing happened.

Tim exhaled quietly.

As though he had known all along that stories didn't work.

Mira was about to close the stove door.

Something clicked deep inside.

Not wood.

Stone.

A silver line ran across the old white surface.

Then another.

And a third.

They climbed upward and intertwined.

A wolf's paw.

Above it, a small crescent moon.

Tim stepped back.

"Did you do that?"

"No."

Fire flared inside the stove.

Silver.

Soft.

Transparent as moonlight.

It didn't leap outward, scorch her face, or fill the kitchen with smoke.

It simply appeared.

And the room grew warm.

The old wooden spoons swayed on their hooks.

Somewhere in the front room, glass chimed.

Mira and Tim turned at the same time.

Then came a rustling sound.

Like someone turning pages.

Mira went first.

Silver light followed her out of the kitchen.

The shop no longer looked dead.

Glass jars gleamed on the shelves.

Dust sparkled.

The embroidered paws on the old gray ribbon stood out more clearly, as though the silver fire remembered them better than human eyes did.

A notebook lay on the counter.

Thin.

Brown leather cover.

Mira knew for certain it hadn't been there a minute earlier.

She stepped closer.

Words slowly appeared across the leather.

Faint at first.

Then brighter.

A Home for the Unchosen.

Tim came to stand beside her.

His shoulder almost brushed her arm.

"Is that about the Grays?"

Mira looked at his hidden wrist.

At the ribbon.

At the wolf-face molds.

At the stove that had been silent for twenty years and had awakened at the sound of a child's name.

"I don't know."

She placed her palm on the notebook.

"But I'm going to find out."

A distant wolf howl rolled past the windows.

Tim went pale.

"They're looking for me."

Mira turned.

A light appeared beyond the old mill.

Then a second.
Lanterns.
Moving this way.
Slowly.
Steadily.
Tim backed away.
"I told you."
Mira closed the notebook.
"Kitchen."
"They'll take me."
"First they'll have to talk to me."
"But you're not the Luna anymore."
Mira looked at the door.
An hour ago, she had thought everything had been taken from her.
Her title.
Her home.
Her husband.
Her place in the pack.
Now there was a child behind her whom someone had taught to believe he was bad.
And for the first time all night, Mira knew exactly what she wanted.
She wanted that door to remain closed to whoever had come to take him away.
"No," she said. "I'm not the Luna anymore."
The lanterns drew closer.
"But this is still my threshold."
Tim didn't move.
Mira gently urged him toward the kitchen.
"Go."
He went.
The silver fire flared brighter.
At that moment, something changed outside the window.
Mira stepped closer.
On the old sign, nearly washed blank by years of rain, silver letters began to appear one by one.
The same words written on the notebook.
A Home for the Unchosen.
The lanterns stopped at the porch.
A board creaked beneath a heavy boot.
Someone struck the door with a fist.
"Open in the name of the council."
Mira placed her hand on the copper key.
Behind her, the stove burned.
Tim stood silent in the kitchen.
And for the first time that night, the silence around her was not emptiness.
It was home.
Mira lifted her head.
"Then let them knock."

Chapter 2. The Sugar Shop Awakens

The knock came again.

"Open up in the name of the council."

Tim flinched.

Mira felt him move behind her and turned.

The boy had tugged his sleeve down almost to his fingertips again. A moment ago, he had been standing beside the silver-burning stove, staring at the words A Home for the Unchosen. Now he was once more the child who had learned to disappear before grown-ups could decide he was one child too many.

"Into the kitchen," Mira said.

"They'll see me."

"They'll see me first."

"But — "

"Tim."

He fell silent.

Mira kept her voice calm. Not like a Luna. Not like the mistress of the main house. Simply like an adult who had promised a child she would not send him back tonight.

"Go to the stove."

Tim backed away.

The silver flame in the kitchen brightened slightly, as though it approved.

Another knock sounded outside.

"Mira Velesova, we know you're in there."

"Astounding powers of observation," she muttered.

Mira lifted the bar.

Turned the copper key.

And opened the door only wide enough to step onto the porch herself, blocking the entrance with her body.

Two men stood outside.

She knew the first well.

Savely Kruk, a junior clerk of the council. Narrow shoulders, a long neck, a leather document case strapped across his chest, and the face of a man who had delivered other people's decisions so often that somewhere along the way, he had begun to mistake them for his own authority.

Beside him stood a watchman wearing a gray armband.

Mira had seen him with Varg's men before.

"Working late, Savely."

The clerk raised his lantern.

"I wouldn't have thought jokes appropriate in your current position."

"And I wouldn't have thought midnight visitors were part of my current position. It seems we're both disappointed."

He tried to peer over her shoulder.

Mira pulled the door closer behind her.

"We received a report that a child left the House of the Younger Branches," Savely said. "A boy named Timofey."

"And?"

"He was seen on the eastern road."

"The eastern road is long."

"We've been ordered to search the shop."

"By whom?"

Savely paused.

"The council."

"Who signed the order?"

"The council acts in the Alpha's name."

"That isn't an answer."

The watchman shifted his weight.

Savely pulled a folded sheet from his case.

"I have the authority to inspect the premises."

"Read it."

"What?"

"The signature."

The clerk looked at her, irritation sharpening his features.

"Mira Velesova, you are no longer the Luna. You have no right to demand — "

"I do have the right to ask who intends to enter a house your own council handed over to me."

"For temporary use."

"All the more reason to be careful. I wouldn't want state property damaged by an unlawful intrusion."

The watchman coughed.

For a moment, Mira could almost believe he was hiding a laugh.

Savely unfolded the document.

"Varg Roun. Senior Councilor."

"Not Arsen."

"The Alpha granted the council authority over matters concerning the Younger Branches."

"Then let the Alpha tell me himself that this authority extends to my door."

"You are obstructing order."

"Children belong under blankets, at tables, or in the arms of people who love them. Papers belong under order."

The silver light beneath the door grew more visible.

A thin line of it spilled across the step.

The watchman lowered his eyes.

"What is that?"

"The stove."

"That stove hasn't burned in twenty years."

Mira turned her head toward him.

"How do you know?"

The man immediately closed off.

Savely cut in.

"If you are concealing a child with a Gray mark, that will be entered into the record."

Mira looked at him.

"Don't call a child by his mark."

"That is the official — "

"His name is Tim."

The clerk fell silent.

"If you've come for Tim," Mira continued, "bring me an order signed by Arsen himself. Not Varg. Not the council office. The Alpha."

"By morning, you'll regret this."

"Today I've already been promised a life with no road back. You'll have to come up with something fresher."

The watchman finally turned away.
This time, Mira clearly saw the corner of his mouth twitch.
Savely saw it too.
"At dawn, you'll be summoned to explain yourself."
"Wonderful. People usually find it easier to read signatures in daylight."
He snapped his case shut.
"This old shop won't protect you."
Mira glanced at the silver light beneath the door.
"So far, it's doing a better job than most people."
Savely turned away.
The watchman lingered one step below the porch.
"It's cold by the eastern well," he said without looking at Mira. "No place for children."
Savely spun around.
"What?"
"I said the road is slippery."
They left.
Mira remained on the porch until both lanterns disappeared beyond the old mill.
Only then did she close the door.
The bar dropped back into place.
Tim was waiting near the kitchen.
"You didn't tell them."
"No."
"Why?"
"Did you want me to?"
He frowned.
"No."
"There's your answer."
"They'll come back anyway."
"Most likely."
Mira looked at the notebook.
"Which means we'd better find out what exactly we've gotten ourselves into."
* * *
Tim approached the counter carefully.
"Can we?"
"Together."
The notebook opened.
Words appeared across the page:
When the first child enters the house, the house asks for bread.
When the first fear is left outside the door, the fire asks for something sweet.
When the first lie comes from outside, the mistress must bake the truth so its scent reaches those who kept silent.
Tim read the lines, moving his lips.
"Bake the truth?"
"Looks that way."
"Can you?"
Mira considered the question honestly.
"I can ruin moon crescents so badly that the Alpha once laughed until he cried."
Tim looked up.
"Alphas laugh?"

Pain pricked quickly.

Somewhere in the world there had, indeed, been an Arsen who stood in the kitchen covered in flour and couldn't stop laughing.

Mira let the memory pass through her.

"Sometimes. When the council isn't around."

Tim snorted.

Almost laughed.

For a beginning, that was enough.

"So. Bread," Mira said.

"Buns."

"Why buns?"

"It's a sugar shop."

"A compelling argument."

She returned to the kitchen.

The stove burned steadily.

On the shelves they found flour, coarse sugar, and several tin boxes. Everything looked suspiciously fresh for a place that had stood empty for decades.

"Shop," Mira said, "if you're planning to poison me with enchanted flour, at least give me some warning."

The stove clicked softly.

Tim looked at her with complete seriousness.

"You offended it."

"It'll survive."

They brought water in from the well behind the shop.

Mira kneaded the dough, remembering the cook from the main house and her eternal warning: "Don't press so hard, Lady Mira. Dough isn't a councilor. Pressure doesn't improve it."

The first lump came out too dense.

The second stuck to her hands.

Tim watched closely.

"Are you sure you know how?"

"What an incredibly encouraging assistant."

"I only asked."

"That's how all unpleasant inspections begin."

The boy smiled.

Just a little.

Mira dusted the table with flour.

"Let's make a deal. If the buns turn out awful, we'll say that's exactly how they were supposed to be."

"What if they're good?"

"We'll sell them for a fortune."

"Do you already have customers?"

"You."

Tim's expression immediately turned serious.

"I don't have any money."

Mira stopped kneading.

"Then you'll be the taster."

"Is that free?"

"It's a position of enormous responsibility."

"What do I do?"

"Eat and complain honestly."
"I'm good at that."
"I've noticed."
Something rustled in the notebook in the next room.
Mira glanced toward the shopfront.
"And now that one's joining in."
When the dough finally began to resemble actual dough, she divided it into small rounds.
Tim chose the mold shaped like a wolf's face.
"This one."
"Why?"
He shrugged.
"Just because."
Mira didn't ask.
A rustle sounded outside.
Not from the road.
From the yard.
Tim went pale.
Mira grabbed the rolling pin.
At least her choice of weapon had improved.
"Stay here."
"They're not adults."
"How do you know?"
"The footsteps."
He listened.
"Lissa."
Mira froze.
"Who?"
"Lissa."
A quiet voice came from the back door.
"Is Tim here?"
The boy lunged forward.
Mira raised a hand.
"Who's asking?"
"Lissa."
Tim exhaled.
"She was with me."
Mira opened the door.
A girl of about nine stood on the threshold.
Barefoot.
Wearing a dark dress and an old boy's vest. Her fair hair had been cut unevenly. Her face was thin, almost expressionless.
Her eyes were gray.
Far too calm.
An older boy stood behind her.
Romka Burov.
The same boy Mira had seen near the Moon Circle.
Muddy boots. An old split in one eyebrow. A long stick clutched in his hands.
"I knew it," he said to Tim. "You ran off and didn't even leave a sign."
"I did."

"Where?"
"By the well."
"That was a scratch!"
"I was in a hurry."
"And we weren't, obviously. We just enjoy walking through mud in the middle of the night."
"Quiet," Lissa said.
Romka stopped instantly.
Not because he was afraid.
Because he listened to her.
Mira looked at the three of them.
One child was trouble.
Three were practically a declaration.
"Come in."
Romka narrowed his eyes.
"Just like that?"
"I can make you fill out a petition in triplicate, if you'd prefer. But I'm afraid I don't have ink yet."
Tim snorted.
"What are you laughing at?"
"Nothing."
Lissa stepped inside first.
She stopped in the middle of the shop and tipped her head back toward the ceiling.
Then she looked at the walls.
The floor.
The silver light spilling from the kitchen.
As if she were greeting the shop, not Mira.
"It let you in," the girl said.
"For now."
Lissa shook her head.
"Not for now."
Romka followed her inside, though he didn't let go of the stick.
"If you turn us in, I'll break a window."
"Why?"
"So we can escape."
Mira glanced at the dirty glass.
"The window's old. Break it and we'll have a draft all night."
Romka frowned.
"I'm serious."
"So am I. I don't have anything to repair it with."
Tim said with satisfaction, "I told you she was strange."
"I can hear you."
"I wanted you to."
"Brave."
"Sometimes."
Lissa was already walking toward the kitchen.
She stopped in the doorway.
The silver stove flared.
The girl closed her eyes.
"Glad."

"Who is?"

"The stove."

Romka snorted.

"Lissa talks to walls."

"And you talk to a stick," Tim said.

"At least a stick answers clearly."

"How?"

Romka rapped it against the floor.

The floorboard beneath the stick gave a sharp creak.

He jerked his hand back.

Tim laughed.

Louder this time.

Mira looked at the silver fire.

"Looks like you've got competition."

* * *

They made the first batch of buns together, all four of them.

Mira kneaded.

Tim watched the sugar.

Romka claimed he was responsible for security, though he spent most of his time trying to steal pieces of dough.

Lissa stood beside the stove.

"Too soon," she said.

"I didn't even ask."

"The stove did."

"Tell it I'm nervous."

"It knows."

"That's becoming alarming."

Romka stuck a finger into the sugar.

Mira slapped his hand away.

"Head of security?"

"I was checking it."

"The sugar?"

"For poison."

"And?"

He licked his finger.

"Safe."

Tim rolled his eyes.

"Hero."

"Still alive, aren't I?"

The first tray went into the stove.

Silver flame curled around the molds without touching the dough.

Mira braced herself for the smell of burning.

Instead, a few minutes later, the warm scent of sugar and vanilla drifted through the kitchen.

Simple.

Homey.

It made Mira suddenly, fiercely hungry, and she remembered that she had barely eaten anything since yesterday morning.

Lissa said, "Now."

Mira pulled out the tray.

The buns were crooked.
Some were too dark.
One wolf face had spread so badly that it looked like a bear at the end of a very bad day.
Romka pointed at it.
"That one's mine."
"Why?"
"Looks like me."
"My condolences."
He grinned.
Tim took a little crescent moon.
Lissa chose a star.
Mira broke one bun in half.
The crumb inside shimmered faintly silver.
"Normal food doesn't do that."
"How does it taste?" Romka asked.
She tried it.
Sweet.
A little dry.
Not enough salt.
But warm.
Real.
"Not enough sugar," Mira said.
"You put in a lot."
"Then the shop is greedy."
The stove clicked indignantly.
"I heard you."
Tim ate slowly.
Not because he didn't like it.
That was how children ate when they still weren't sure they were allowed a second piece.
Mira pretended not to notice.
She set another bun beside him.
He looked at it.
"Is that for me?"
"No. The bun simply decided this was the perfect place to lie down."
"Really?"
Romka groaned.
"Tim."
"What?"
"She's joking."
"I know."
But Tim took the second bun anyway.
A few minutes later, Mira realized she was smiling.
Only a little.
"Don't you like them?" Romka asked.
"I do."
"Then why do you look like that?"
Mira brushed a finger across her cheek.
There was flour on it.

"Sometimes something good reminds you how long it's been since you ate where you truly had a place, instead of where you were supposed to."

Romka stopped chewing.

Lissa lowered her eyes.

Tim said quickly, "You have a place here."

Then immediately pretended to be very busy with his bun.

Mira didn't thank him.

Didn't turn simple words into a solemn vow.

She only nodded.

"Then so do you."

Something clicked in the shopfront.

The shutters over the display window began to open on their own.

Romka jumped to his feet.

"What's that?"

The first gray light of dawn entered through the cloudy windows.

Wherever it touched the floor, the dust gathered into thin silver trails and slipped away toward the walls.

Romka choked.

"It's cleaning?!"

"Looks like it."

"Will it wash the floors by itself too?"

The floorboard beneath his foot creaked ominously.

He jumped.

"Fine! I get it! I'll do it myself!"

Tim laughed — really laughed, short and almost hoarse from lack of practice.

Mira went still.

There was no need to explain that sound.

Not to herself.

Not to the reader of her own life.

A child who only hours ago had stood outside a door asking whether he was allowed to come in was laughing in the kitchen.

That was enough.

The shop was waking up.

Not all at once.

The door of a lower cupboard swung open, revealing clean towels.

A ball of twine rolled out from beneath the counter.

Dust vanished from several shelves.

An old mural emerged on the wall: little wolf pups carrying baskets beneath a full moon.

Lissa walked over to it.

Placed her palm against the paint.

"It remembers."

"What?"

"Voices."

The girl closed her eyes.

"Children. A lot of them."

Tim stopped chewing.

"They were here?"

"Yes."

"Grays?"

Lissa didn't answer immediately.

"Someone used to sing while kneading dough."

"Who?" Mira asked.

"A woman."

"Can you see her?"

"No. Only her hands."

Lissa smiled faintly.

"Warm hands."

The stove's flame softened.

"What is she saying?"

The girl listened.

Then, very quietly, she said, "There are no Grays. Only those no one looked at closely enough."

The kitchen fell silent.

Tim slowly lowered his bun.

Romka looked away.

Mira's gaze moved from the mural to the embroidered paw prints, then to the three children's faces.

"Who was this woman?"

Lissa took her hand from the wall.

"I don't know."

Romka muttered, "Walls could stand to tell us something useful."

"Maybe they haven't had anyone to talk to in a long time," Mira said.

"Then they should practice."

A baking mold clattered near the stove.

"It heard you," Tim warned.

"I'm not afraid of anything."

A second mold fell from the shelf.

Romka raised both hands.

"I deeply respect ancient architecture."

* * *

Once the sky outside had grown lighter, Mira found a small slate near the counter.

It had probably once been used for prices.

She spent a long time deciding what to write on it.

Closed was pointless.

Council Not Admitted was satisfying, but perhaps premature.

In the end, she wrote:

Sugar Shop.

Open after sunrise.

For those who come with kindness.

The chalk warmed between her fingers.

A tiny wolf paw appeared by itself beneath the words.

"Showing off," Mira said.

"It likes things that are funny," Lissa said.

The girl stood in the kitchen doorway wrapped in a blanket they'd found.

"You're not asleep?"

"The walls are being happy too loudly."

"Sorry."

"It's better this way."

Lissa came over to the slate.

"They'll be angry."
"The council?"
A nod.
"Because of the sign?"
"If someone comes with kindness, they'll be let in."
"And if they don't?"
"Everyone will see."
Mira looked at her.
"The shop can tell the difference?"
"Not always."
Lissa lowered her eyes.
"But children can."
"Is that why they call you Grays?"
The girl rubbed her thumb over the mark.
"That's what they call us when they don't want anyone else to listen."
"What do you call yourselves?"
Lissa was silent for a long time.
"Nothing."
Then she went back to the stove.
The word remained behind.
Nothing.
It was easier to move a child from one house to another when they were nothing.
Easier to put a mark on them.
Easier to say order, placement, Younger Branch.
Easier to search the night not for Tim, but for a child with a Gray mark.
Mira looked down at her hands.
Flour beneath her nails.
A red line around her neck where the chain had rested.
The title was gone.
But her name remained.
Then names would be where she started.
The first person to arrive after sunrise wasn't from the council.
It was Visena.
The small, wiry old woman appeared on the road with a basket in one hand and a dark scarf tied over her hair. She walked slowly, glancing around the whole way.
She stopped on the porch.
Read the slate.
Then raised her eyes to the silver words across the window:
A Home for the Unchosen.
Visena went pale.
Mira opened the door before she had time to knock.
"Good morning."
"I knew the old sign would lie."
"What?"
Visena jabbed her walking stick upward.
"Yesterday there was faded sugar painted on it."
Mira leaned out to look.
The old image had nearly disappeared from the sign.
In its place, a silver crescent moon had emerged.

"It did that itself."

"Of course it did."

The old woman said it as though shops rewrote their signs every morning.

Visena stepped inside.

Romka's voice came from the kitchen.

"Who's there?"

The old woman stopped.

Tim appeared with a blanket draped over his shoulders.

He saw Visena and froze.

Lissa peered out behind him.

Visena studied them for a long moment.

Mira was already preparing to intervene.

The old woman set her basket on the counter.

"Got any buns?"

Mira blinked.

"What?"

"Buns. Is this shop open or did I drag myself all the way out here for nothing?"

Tim asked quietly, "Can't she see us?"

Visena didn't even turn around.

"I see perfectly well. Old eyes aren't empty. I simply don't see any need to shout down the road about who's having breakfast in here."

Romka came out.

"Who are you going to tell?"

"My cat."

"Why your cat?"

"She's deaf and doesn't believe a word I say anyway."

Tim giggled.

Visena finally looked at him.

More gently.

"And don't you laugh with your mouth full. You'll choke and frighten the mistress of the house."

The word mistress settled easily into the room.

As though only yesterday no one had been deciding whether Mira had the right to call herself mistress of anything at all.

She moved the buns onto a towel.

"I won't take your money."

"And I don't accept charity."

Visena produced three copper coins.

"A shop is a shop. A mistress is a mistress. Goods are goods."

"They're crooked."

"The first ones always are. At least they're honest."

She took two.

Broke the third in half and tasted it on the spot.

She chewed slowly.

Severely.

Romka couldn't stand the suspense.

"Well?"

"Not enough sugar."

Mira sighed.

"I've heard that already."

"Not enough salt either."
"No one's mentioned that yet."
"Then the children are sparing your feelings."
"We were busy," Romka declared.
"Doing what?"
"Rescuing."
"From salt?"
Tim snorted with laughter.
Visena took another bite.
"You'll live."
It sounded almost like a blessing.
Lissa moved closer.
"Do you remember the shop?"
The old woman stopped chewing.
"I do."
"Who used to sing here?"
Visena slowly lowered the bun.
"What makes you think anyone sang?"
"The walls told me."
The old woman's fingers tightened around the basket.
"Then the truth really has awakened."
Mira felt the warmth of the room retreat half a step.
"Who was the former mistress?"
Visena didn't answer.
"Yarina said they baked here for moon children."
"Yarina always said more than she meant to."
"That isn't an answer."
"It isn't supposed to be."
Romka protested, "We want to know too, you know."
"Exactly why I'm not saying it in front of you."
"Why do grown-ups always say that?"
"Because some things need to stop being dangerous before they get to become interesting."
Visena turned to Mira.
"Don't open the back storeroom today."
"Why?"
"Because just because the shop opened the front doesn't mean it's forgiven everything else."
"What exactly hasn't it forgiven?"
"Specifics don't survive the council very well."
Mira looked at her.
"Varg?"
Visena looked away.
That was answer enough.
"Until evening," the old woman said. "Don't touch it."
"And after that?"
"After that, we'll see who survives until evening with more sense than they had this morning."
Romka whispered to Tim in awe, "I want to grow old like that."
"Try growing old at all first," Visena muttered.
* * *
They all heard the hoofbeats on the wet road.

Tim was the first to retreat toward the kitchen.

Romka grabbed his stick.

Lissa automatically tugged her sleeve down.

Visena muttered something so ancient and profane that Mira couldn't make out a single word.

She went to the window.

There was only one rider.

But she didn't need to see his face.

The way he sat the horse.

The set of his shoulders.

The way he held the reins as though both horse and road already knew what he had decided.

Arsen.

He stopped in front of the shop.

Dismounted.

First he looked at the sign.

Then at the silver words across the window.

A Home for the Unchosen.

Even from inside, Mira saw his shoulders tighten.

Then his gaze dropped to the slate:

For those who come with kindness.

Arsen stood there for several moments.

Then he knocked.

Mira held her breath without meaning to.

Yesterday, he had forbidden her to leave.

Today, he stood on her porch waiting to see whether she would let him in.

She opened the door.

Between them hung the scent of wet road, sugar, and everything they had failed to say the night before.

Arsen looked at her.

Then past her shoulder.

But this time, not past her.

At the children.

Tim stood closest to the kitchen.

Lissa beside the stove.

Romka with his stick, like a tiny watchman no one had ever appointed.

Arsen saw the marks.

His face became unreadable.

"Mira."

She waited.

"The council requires you to appear for questioning immediately."

He took out a silver plate.

Held it toward her.

Mira didn't take it.

First she looked at the Alpha's seal.

Then lower.

At the words.

In the event of refusal to appear, the children will be returned by force, and the premises of the sugar shop will be sealed pending the council's decision.

She read it again.

Once.

Twice.
Not because she didn't understand.
Because she wanted to be certain.
At the bottom was a signature.
Arsen Gradov.
Mira raised her eyes.
The words struck not because she feared losing the walls.
There were children behind those walls now.
This time, the signature was his.

Chapter 3. The Alpha at the Door

Mira stared at the hand holding the silver plate.

Strong fingers. A thin scar near the thumb. The familiar line of his wrist beneath a dark sleeve.

Once, that hand had held hers before the Moon Circle.

Now it held an order bearing the name:

Arsen Gradov.

"That was fast," Mira said. "Last night the council came without your signature. This morning they already have it."

Arsen didn't look away.

"I came myself."

"I noticed. Only one horse at the porch."

"Mira."

"What? Am I supposed to appreciate the gesture? Instead of a clerk and a watchman coming for a child, the Alpha came alone?"

Behind her, Romka gave a quiet snort.

Lissa touched his elbow.

The boy fell silent, though he didn't let go of his stick.

Arsen heard him.

His gaze moved past Mira and settled on the children.

Tim stood closest to the kitchen, his sleeve tugged almost to his fingertips.

Lissa was by the stove.

Romka stood with the same stick that had already become part of his personality.

"I signed the summons requiring you to appear before the council," Arsen said.

Mira lifted the plate between two fingers.

"And this?"

He looked at the line authorizing the children to be returned by force.

The silence lasted too long.

"I saw that too," he said at last.

That was not the answer she had expected.

Not an excuse.

Not Varg added it afterward.

Not I didn't read it.

Worse.

"And you signed it."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Arsen exhaled slowly.

"Because until this morning, I believed the House of the Younger Branches was a safe place for them."

Tim lowered his head.

Mira felt something inside her turn colder.

"Then it's very simple. You decided that if I refused to do what the council demanded, three children could be taken by force and returned to the place one of them ran away from in the rain last night."

"No."

"That's what it says."

"I know."

"Good. Then at least we can both read."

Arsen's jaw tightened.

"I signed the order because I believed it meant returning the children to the protection of the House of the Younger Branches until the matter was reviewed."

"And once again, you trusted a piece of paper."

He fell silent.

Mira gave a humorless smile.

"Remarkably familiar feeling."

The blow landed.

Arsen didn't try to dodge it.

"Yes."

One word.

Before, he would have argued.

Explained.

Said an Alpha had no right to make decisions based on feelings.

Today he said none of it.

And that didn't make it hurt any less.

"After Savely came here last night, I ordered that no action be taken without me," Arsen continued. "That's why I came alone."

"Do you want me to thank you?"

"No."

"Good. Because I won't."

Visena, still standing by the counter with her basket, gave an approving hum.

Arsen looked at her for the first time.

"Visena."

"Alpha."

"What are you doing here?"

"Eating buns."

"I can see that."

"Then you've ruined a perfectly good question."

Romka lowered his face to hide a smile.

Arsen rubbed a tired hand over his chin.

"The shop hasn't been officially registered yet."

"And I'm officially old already. That means I get to come early."

"Visena."

"What, Visena? I brought apples. If the council has decided to ban apples, let them come tell me themselves. Preferably Varg. I've wanted to explain a few things to him with a basket for years."

Mira turned her head.

"With a basket?"

"For a start."

Tim laughed softly.

Arsen looked at him.

The boy immediately went quiet.

His hand crept toward his sleeve.

Arsen noticed.

"Don't."

Tim froze.

"What?"

"Hide your hand."

The boy looked at Mira.
She said nothing.
This answer wasn't hers to give.
"You don't like looking at it," Tim muttered.
Something shifted in Arsen's face.
Only slightly.
"What I don't like is that someone taught you to think you have to hide it."
Tim didn't pull the sleeve down.
But he didn't raise it either.
His hand stopped halfway.
Romka narrowed his eyes.
"Are you good now?"
Mira turned toward him.
"Romka…"
"What? I asked."
Unexpectedly, Arsen answered.
"No."
Romka blinked.
"Oh."
"I'm still figuring out how bad I've been."
Visena raised her brows.
"A rare moment of common sense. Someone should write it down."
The notebook on the counter rustled.
Everyone looked at it.
Romka slowly broke into a grin.
"It is writing it down."
Arsen shifted his gaze to the old notebook.
"What is that?"
"The house notebook," Mira said.
"It writes by itself?"
"Sometimes."
"And what did it write now?"
Mira bent over the page.
The ink was only beginning to appear.
Whoever comes bearing power must write what he brought it here to do.
Visena coughed into her fist.
"Clever book."
Arsen read the words.
Said nothing.
"I didn't come to take the children by force," he said after a few seconds.
"But you signed a paper that allows it."
"Yes."
"Then the paper needs to stop allowing it."
He looked at her.
"What do you want?"
Mira was surprised by how simple the answer was.
"I want no one to be able to take them today while using your name as an excuse."
Arsen nodded.
"All right."

"Don't tell me all right. Write it."

Romka let out an admiring breath.

"Now that I like."

"Romka."

"I'm quiet."

The notebook opened wider.

A small inkwell suddenly rolled across the counter.

It hadn't been there a minute ago.

Then a quill emerged from a crack between the boards.

Mira folded her arms.

"The shop is delighted to cooperate."

Arsen picked up the quill.

"What exactly should it say?"

"That Tim, Lissa, and Romka stay here until the matter is reviewed. That no one has the right to take them without you being here in person."

"And without your consent?"

Mira looked at him.

"No one needs my consent to refrain from coming for a child in the middle of the night."

"That isn't what I meant."

"Then word it more precisely. You're the Alpha. You should have practice."

He lowered the quill to the page.

He wrote quickly.

I, Arsen Gradov, Alpha of the Northern Pack, confirm that Tim, Lissa, and Romka will remain in the sugar shop until tomorrow at dawn. No member of the council, watch, or staff of the House of the Younger Branches may remove them by force without my personal presence.

Arsen stopped.

Then added:

I take personal responsibility for the enforcement of this order.

He signed it.

Mira read it twice.

"Until tomorrow at dawn?"

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