



Chapter 12



POV: Isla

The messenger found me in the training yard with sweat drying on my skin and my knuckles already raw.

He delivered it without meeting my eyes, his gaze sliding past my shoulder the way gazes do when the message is designed to unsettle and the carrier wants no part of the reaction. I watched him walk away.

The morning session had been harder than necessary, the kind where warriors land a half-second early and no one calls it.

I already knew what the summons meant. I had been feeling it build for days in the sideways glances, the deliberate quiet when I entered a room, the particular quality of hostility that has moved past individual and become collective.

They had finally organized it. The session, the full council, the warriors along the walls — this had been arranged with care.

The council hall was packed. Elders in their half-circle, warriors lining the walls with their arms crossed and their expressions set hard.

The murmur filled the chamber like standing water, thick and stagnant. I walked in and took a position where I could see all the exits and every face, because that was the only way I knew how to enter a space that did not want me.

Elder Morvin stood at the center of the floor, and his posture said this

had been planned for longer than today.

I had been watching him for weeks. Silvered hair pulled back, sharp features arranged into permanence, the kind of man who has held a position long enough that the position has started to hold him.

His eyes found me the moment I crossed the threshold, burning with the satisfaction of someone who has been patient and is now done being patient.

Draven sat at the head of the room. Fingers drumming the armrest in a slow, unhurried rhythm, his expression assembled into practiced indifference. He glanced at me once when I entered, then returned his attention to Morvin.

"You called the council." Draven's voice was calm, almost lazy. "I assume you have a reason."

Morvin moved to the center of the floor. His presence expanded to fill the space the way authority fills a room when it has decided to make itself felt.

"A rogue cannot be Luna." The word Luna hit before I had finished processing the sentence. Draven had declared it to this council and had not told me.

I had walked into this room blind, a title I had never agreed to placed on my back. The murmur broke apart and came back louder, and I stood in it and gave the room nothing.

I pressed my fingernails into my palms and kept my face completely closed and gave the room nothing.

"We have all seen it." Morvin scanned the assembled wolves with the

patience of a man delivering a verdict he has rehearsed.

"She walks among us, but she is not one of us. She has not earned her place here. She does not carry our blood. And yet she stands at your side, Alpha, as if she belongs."

Every word landed with precision. He was speaking about me, to the room, constructing the case in front of an audience.

I did not look at Draven. I did not need his eyes on me to know he was watching.

Then Draven spoke, and the words he used were not any words I had been prepared for.

"You're running away from something. And this — this is the only way you can protect yourself. Agree to be my Luna and bear my heir, and you will have my protection from whatever it is that's haunting you."

The silence that followed had weight and direction, and both were pointed at me.

They had not known. Not the full version. The council shifted, and the murmur changed register, and I stood in the center of it.

"You cannot expect us to bow to an outsider, an unproven wolf," one of the elders snapped, and it came out ragged, which meant the composure was cracking.

Draven's fingers stopped drumming against the armrest. The stillness that replaced it was more deliberate than the motion had been.

"Then I invoke the Luna Combat Trial." He delivered it without raising his voice.

The gasps moved through the chamber in a wave. I felt the air change before I processed the words, felt the room's temperature drop, felt every warrior along the walls go still.

The Luna Combat Trial. A buried practice, a brutality the packs had collectively agreed to leave in the past. A fight not for dominance, not for honor. For survival. One combatant dead before the other could claim the title.

Three seconds, and then Tyla Morvin stepped forward from the wall as though she had been placed there exactly for this moment.

Broad-shouldered and built from years of actual war, not training yard approximations of it. Raven hair braided tight against her skull, exposing the hard line of her jaw.

Her golden eyes found me immediately and stayed. What was in them was not hostility. It was anticipation, the particular kind that arrives when you have been ready for a long time and the thing you prepared for has finally walked into the room.

She had been waiting. Morvin had not organized this alone — Tyla had known what was coming and had already decided her answer.

"You should go back to the woods, where you belong." Her voice was smooth, the way edges are smooth when they have been deliberately maintained. "I am the rightful Luna of this pack."

Every instinct I had said this woman would kill me. She was bigger, clearly trained, shifted, and backed by the most powerful elder in the room. The math was not in my favor.

I squared my shoulders, took the full measure of her across the open

floor, and looked her in the eye.

"Well then." I held her gaze and did not blink. "You're gonna have to kill me first."

Her smirk widened. She crossed her arms and looked me over the way you look at a problem that is smaller than anticipated.

"This is how it should be." Voice smooth, edged with steel, the tone of someone reading from a verdict they wrote themselves. "One of us against one of you."

The way she said you was designed to diminish, to remind the room and me exactly what category I occupied. It moved across my skin and left a mark.

Draven had not reacted. He sat back, fingers still against the armrest, his expression giving nothing to anyone in that chamber.

Every eye in the room moved in the same sequence: Tyla, then me, then Draven, then back, reading the triangle of it.

I looked at Tyla's grin. Her arms folded, already running the calculation of what my blood would look like on the stone floor. She had done this before.

The fire arrived without announcement. It moved up from the base of my chest, an older and harder force, the specific refusal that builds in a person who has been told too many times to yield.

I had no pack. I had no wolf. I had a body that had survived everything this world had thrown at it without shifting, without backing down, without anyone who had stayed.

I had no pack. I had no wolf. I had a body that had survived everything this world had thrown at it without shifting, without backing down, without anyone who had stayed.

I met Draven's stare across the chamber. My heart hammered hard enough that he could hear it.

I was not going to kneel and I was not going to run, and the room needed to understand both things simultaneously. "I accept."

Draven's lips curved into a slow, contained smirk, and the room did not breathe for three full seconds.

End *of* *The* **Chapter**

Chapter 12



Comments

11



Gifts

222