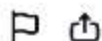




Chapter 17



POV: Isla

The final blow landed and Tyla crumpled, and for one suspended second the arena was silent in a way that arenas never are.

Then my legs went, and gave in. Not a decision. Not fear. My body had simply spent everything it had and had nothing left to negotiate with.

The dirt came up at me and I let it come, and the last thing I registered before the dark took me was the crowd breaking open — a vicious, fractured sound that did not know what it wanted to be.

When I woke, the ceiling was wrong and the light was wrong and the smell told me everything else I needed to know before I opened my eyes.

Stone overhead. A scent I recognized with particular and unwelcome clarity: my own blood layered under dried herbs and clean linen.

The light came from low angles. My ribs were a held note of pain, constant and informational, and every breath I took was a negotiation with them.

I was in a bed, which meant someone had carried me, which meant I had been unconscious long enough for that to be organized. I lay still and took inventory and listened to the room.

Two people. The low register of Draven's voice and the specific economy of Susan's.

"Three days." Susan's voice was level, aimed at Draven, carrying no comfort in it. "Alpha, you know what that means."

Three days. I set that down in the part of my mind that held things I could not afford to react to, and I kept my breathing even.

A beat of silence, heavy and deliberate. Then: "She is alive. She won the trial. She is my Luna."

"The elders want to see her wolf." Susan's voice did not soften for the delivery. "The whole pack does. They need proof."

I kept my breathing even. I had been practicing it my entire life.

"It won't ever stop, will it?." Draven's voice had gone quiet, and quiet on Draven was a specific quality I had learned to recognize. "They will keep finding ways to push her out."

A pause. Then Susan, quieter: "She is a rogue, Draven. You punish and execute rogues. You do not protect them. You do not make them a Luna."

The room was still for a moment that carried weight in every direction, and then Draven moved.

"Let me talk to the elders." Steel by the end of the sentence, and then the door.

I opened my eyes to find Susan still at the end of the bed, arms at her sides, expression giving away nothing.

She had known I was awake. The duration of that knowledge was unspecified and she was not offering it.

"How long have you been listening?" Her voice had no accusation in it. It was a genuine question, which was almost worse.

"Long enough." I pushed myself upright. The ribs made their objection known. I noted the objection and ignored it.

She studied me for a long moment with those sharp eyes that never gave anything freely. Then she moved to the door. "The council is meeting. He will want you there."

She was gone before I had finished parsing the sentence, and the door closed behind her with the particular sound of a person who has delivered their message and considers their work complete.

I got out of bed. My legs held, which was the negotiation I had been most uncertain about. My clothes were folded on the chair, still dark with dried blood in places.

I dressed one item at a time with the methodical pace of someone whose hands are shaking and who has made the decision not to acknowledge it.

The council chamber was the same room it had been when I first walked into it — but I had not been the same person then, and the room received me differently now.

The elders were assembled. Draven stood at the head of the room with his back straight and his expression arranged into the specific blankness he used when he had already decided what was going to happen and was allowing the room to reach the conclusion on its own schedule.

Morvin spoke when I entered with the precision of a man who has timed his opening to land at maximum effect, and he did not look at me when he did it.

"The trials are complete." His voice carried the room with the ease of long practice. "For the first time in years, Crimson Fang has a Luna."

I took my position and kept my face closed and I let the words land in the room without reacting to them.

"An Alpha with a Luna is more than a leader," Morvin continued, turning his gaze toward Draven. "It binds the pack's strength to yours, solidifies unity, and increases power. But with that power comes expectations."

Draven tilted his head slightly, the motion unhurried, the single syllable carrying all the patience of a man waiting for someone to arrive at a point he already knows. "And?"

Morvin's fingers tightened on the armrest. "Tyla is being sent away to recover. She will heal. And when she does, she will return stronger."

"I understand." Two words, flat and final, with nothing behind them that invited further conversation.

Morvin's voice took on the particular edge of a man who has been patient long enough. "Do you? The pack will want proof. The strength of an Alpha-Luna bond is tied to their wolves. They will want to see hers."

I felt the room's attention move to me with the collective precision of a pack reading the weakest point in a formation. I did not shift my weight and I did not look away.

"What if she cannot shift?" one of the other elders asked, directing it at Draven and not at me, which I noted.

"She completed the trials." Draven's voice was even, undecorated. "That is proof enough of her strength."

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"For now," Morvin allowed, and the caution in it was a specific kind of threat, the kind that does not announce itself as one.

"There is no weakness." Draven's voice came down hard on the final word and cut the air clean, and the council went silent.

I stood in that silence and I thought about what was coming. The three-moon window. The Luna ceremony. A pack that had watched me bleed in their arena and had not yet decided whether that made me one of them.

I had not shifted. That fact was not going to change tonight, and the council could feel the size of it in the room. So could I.

But I was standing, and my name was on a crest on the table between us, and I had put it there with my hands and my blood and three days of unconsciousness on a bed that was not mine.

That would have to be sufficient for now. And when it stopped being sufficient, I would find the next thing.

I had always found the next thing. The track record on that was unbroken, and I did not intend tonight to be the exception.

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

Chapter 17

 Comments

 Gifts

