



Chapter 19



POV: Isla

The first thing I registered was fire, and for one still moment I thought I was back in the arena.

The low crackle of it, the shifting glow working shadows across the ceiling.

Then the pain arrived, deep and pulsing, radiating from my shoulder down my side, expanding with every breath like a tide that knew the exact perimeter of damage it had caused.

I opened my eyes. The room swayed once, then settled. My throat was raw. My lips were dry. I exhaled through my nose and made the dizziness go back where it came from.

A chair scraped against the floor somewhere to my left, a single deliberate sound.

"You are awake." The voice landed in the quiet room before I had finished orienting. Not Susan's.

I turned my head, my muscles filing a formal objection, and found Draven at the foot of the bed. He looked composed. He always looked composed.

But there was a quality to the way he was standing, a particular rigidity in the set of his shoulders, that I had not seen on him before.

His eyes moved across me with the attention of someone conducting an assessment they needed to complete.

"Draven." My own voice came out rough, stripped of every layer sleep had not bothered to put back.

He stepped forward, closing the distance without rushing it. "You were out for days."

I tried to push upright. The effort made my vision stripe white and my arm buckle, and before I had finished deciding whether to push through it, his hand was at my back, steady and warm, carrying exactly the pressure required and no more. When I was sitting, he let go. He did not move away.

"Four days." His voice had dropped a register, quieter than the way he normally occupied a room.

Four days. I sat with that. Let it settle into the full shape of what it meant. "That long?"

"You lost a great deal of blood." His jaw moved. "And you were not healing as fast as you should have been."

Neither of us needed him to say what the unspoken part of that sentence was. He did not need to.

I looked at the bandages on my arm, white against my skin, tight and clean. "But I did wake up."

An expression crossed his face and was gone before I had finished reading it. "You did."

The fire crackled. Neither of us moved. I could feel his eyes on the side

of my face and I let them stay there, because I had spent four days unconscious and did not have the energy to perform indifference at full capacity.

"In three moons, you will be named Luna." Flat. Direct. The register of a decision already made.

The word hit with more force than I had prepared for, and I sat with the impact of it.

Luna. I turned it over. It still sat on me wrong, cut for someone else, someone who had not come into this pack as a rogue with a false name and an unshifted wolf and a past she had not disclosed to anyone, least of all the man who had just named her.

I flexed my fingers against the blanket, testing the joints one by one.
"They are waiting."

Draven studied me across the bed with the patience of someone who has time and knows it. "Waiting for what?"

"To see if I am worth it." The words came out leveler than the thing they were covering, which was fine. That was what I did.

A tightening moved through his shoulders before it reached his face.
"You won the trial. There is nothing left to prove."

I did not say what I was thinking. I did not need to, because the doubt was already in the room, not just mine, not just his.

The pack's. I had fought and bled and survived, and in three moons there would be a ceremony, and every wolf in Crimson Fang was running the same arithmetic: not whether I had survived the trial, but whether I had a wolf at all.

Susan's voice arrived from the corner of the room I had not yet turned toward, and it carried the particular quality of someone who has been waiting to speak and has timed the moment.

"They are waiting to see your wolf." She delivered it without preparation and without apology.

The room contracted to the size of that sentence, and every sound in it went away except the fire.

I searched inward the way I had been searching for weeks, by reflex now, for Lira's warmth at the edges of my awareness, for the steady hum of the bond I had felt even during her silence. I reached for it the way you reach for a wall in the dark, expecting the contact.

Nothing came back. Not the warmth, not the shape, not even the silence that had been full of her presence before.

Draven's eyes were on me, reading everything my face was working to withhold. "You have not shifted."

Not a question, though I treated it like one: my fingers tightened on the blanket until I felt the texture through the ache in my hand. "No."

Susan did not change her expression, but I could feel it, the precise, silent recalculation of a woman who has been doing this long enough to know what the numbers mean.

"And if I cannot?" The words left my mouth level. Almost steady. A question I had been carrying for weeks and was now setting down on the table between all three of us.

The fire shifted in the grate and settled, and the sound it made was the only answer anyone offered.

only answer anyone offered.

Draven did not speak, and his silence had the specific quality of a man who has the answer and is choosing not to be the one who says it first.

The silence in the room was not the comfortable kind. It had a shape — the shape of an answer that no one present was willing to form aloud.

I had won the trial. I had the crest. I had the title and the blood I had spent to get here and four days of unconsciousness as evidence that none of it had come cheaply.

What I did not have was the one thing the pack needed to see. The one thing not mine to produce on command.

I looked at the fire and breathed through it and gave the room nothing, because that was still entirely mine.

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

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Comments

6



Gifts

222

