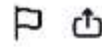




## Chapter 25



POV: Isla

The voice came before the light did, before the drums starting outside, before anything else had rights to the morning: 'You should shift tonight.'

I was already lying in the dark of my room with the curtains holding back the early grey and the particular quality of dread that arrives when you know exactly what the next twelve hours require.

The Luna Ceremony. It had come faster than I was ready for, which was how it was always going to come.

'If you shift, they will accept you.' The certainty in it made it a demand rather than a reassurance, which was exactly what she intended.

I sat up and pressed my palms against the mattress. "I've tried. You know I have."

'Try harder.' Gentle, but with iron underneath it. 'We are meant to be whole. Meant to stand beside our mate as one.'

I flinched at the word. 'Mate.' I still did not know what I was to Draven, a choice he had made, a declaration he had put his name to, or the other thing I had not allowed myself to name.

"It does not work that way." I held the conviction even then. "If I could shift, do you think I would not have by now?"

'You are afraid.' Simply, without accusation. 'You think if you cannot, you will lose everything.'

I closed my eyes. She was not wrong, and I was not going to waste energy pretending otherwise.

None of the distance I had covered held if I could not close this final gap. The pack would not see separate victories. They would see one absence and let it cancel everything.

I had to shift. The attendants came with the dawn, working through my room with the quiet efficiency of people who have a job and are watching a second thing beneath the first.

Crimson silks, embroidered with silver. My hair braided back with thin chains, cold against my scalp. Their glances were not invisible: the quick check, the held breath, the restraint of people waiting for evidence.

They were waiting to see if I was worthy. I had been waiting for the same answer longer than any of them.

When they finished I looked at my own reflection and I held it. The crescent mark on my cheek. The braids. The silk that said Luna to everyone who looked.

I wore the title on my body whether I could fully earn it or not, and I was going to walk out of this room and stand in front of this pack. It had to be enough.

Outside the pack had assembled. Seasoned warriors at the perimeter, elders in ceremonial cloaks, young wolves pressed forward with wide eyes.

The weight of their collective attention was physical, a pressure from every direction. I walked to my position and held my chin level and did not look for exits.

Draven stood at the center, waiting. He looked at me when I approached and the expression on his face was the one he wore when he had already settled on a position and was waiting for the moment to show it.

"This is your night." He kept it low, for me alone. "The pack needs to see you, Isla. All of you."

'All of me.' The words pressed against my chest with the weight of everything I had not yet been able to give them.

Soon, the rituals began. Dances, the pack moving in perfect synchronization under the torchlight with the controlled grace of people who know exactly what this means.

Elders moved to the center and their voices rose in the ancient blessings, layered and melodic, a sound that carries history in its frequency. I followed every motion precisely and let none of my mind show on my face.

'What happens if I fail? What happens when they see?' The questions ran their circuit. I did not answer them.

The last blessing fell and the crowd erupted, howls and voices and the percussion of hands, and then an elder stepped forward, his voice commanding enough to pull the noise back down to silence.

"Tonight, we honor the Luna of Crimson Fang, Isla. She has proven her strength and resilience. Now, as tradition demands, she will reveal her wolf."

Two hundred sets of eyes settled on me simultaneously. Whispers moved through the crowd in a wave. "I heard she has a rogue wolf." "What if she's a rare one?"

'Please, Lira.' The reaching inward, the pull toward her warmth at the edges of my awareness. 'Do not abandon me now.'

I closed my eyes and reached for the shift — the deep, familiar reaching I had practiced in the dark of my room for weeks.

I felt the moonlight on my upturned face. I felt the pack's anticipation pressing over me from every direction.

I reached for the change and nothing came. I tried again. And again, desperation building inside my chest like water finding a crack and pressing through.

"Oh no, she cannot shift." "What kind of Luna is this?"

The boos started at the back and worked forward. The elders exchanged glances, shaking their heads.

Draven stepped toward me, jaw set, his protective instinct readable on his face for anyone paying attention.

Then the clouds opened and a shaft of silver moonlight came down and found me with precision, and it did not feel like light. It felt like a force pressing flat against my sternum and pushing.

The warmth spread from my chest outward in a single expanding wave, and behind it came the pain, and behind the pain came the change.

My bones cracked. My skin stretched. Pain like fire shot through every part of my body at once and I fell to my knees in the dirt.

I did not scream. I had made a decision in the first second: I was going to surrender to this, not fight it, because the fighting was what I had been doing wrong.

'Let go. Surrender to the Moon Goddess.' Lira's voice through the pain, steady and certain. I let go.

The breaking was not the end. It was the beginning, and when it finished, I was on four legs instead of two.

The silence hit before the sound did. Two full seconds of the entire pack holding its breath. Then:

"She is white." A held breath across the crowd. "White as snow." "The rarest of us all."

I lifted my head and the world was recalibrated. Every sense sharpened, the torchlight more specific, the scent of the crowd a hundred distinct and readable things. The ground under my paws was cold and entirely real.

Lira's voice rang through the bond, clear and whole for the first time. 'We did it, Isla. I told you, the Moon Goddess is on your side!'

Draven shifted without hesitation, his massive black wolf stepping forward and lowering his head, his voice coming through the bond with the same directness he carried in every form.

'You shifted, Isla. And you're special. Are you ready to take your first run?'

'I do not know what is happening,' I admitted. 'Then let me show you.'

No hesitation. He turned and ran, and Lira surged forward before I had

No hesitation. He turned and ran, and Lira surged forward before I had finished deciding, following instinctively.

The forest received us. The trees closed around us. Behind us, the pack howled with a sound that had no more doubt in it.

Together we ran beneath the moonlight, and for the first time since I had arrived in Crimson Fang with nothing, the ground felt entirely mine.

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

Chapter 25



Comments

10



Gifts

222