



Chapter 30



POV: Isla

An hour before the ceremony, and I was alone with Draven and the fountain and the specific weight of what I was about to walk into.

I stood near the stone fountain with the moonlight on the silk of my gown, and I did not let the weight of the next hour show on my face.

The whole pack was inside. Waiting. Every elder who had doubted me, every warrior who had watched the trial, every wolf who had held their verdict in reserve until I gave them a reason to release it, all of them positioned in the hall, watching the door I was about to walk through.

Draven exhaled beside me, the sound quiet and deliberate, with the patience of a man who has been watching. "You look beautiful."

A blush moved across my face before I had decided to allow it. I lowered my gaze. "Thank you."

He stepped closer. The full presence of him, solid and steady, occupied the air around me in a way that I had stopped pretending was not a factor in my calculations. "Are you ready?"

The question sat in my chest with the specific pressure of everything I had not yet earned the right to stop asking.

I had survived the trial. I had shifted under a full moon in front of two hundred witnesses and the wolf that came out of me had been white, and had been the answer to every doubt the pack had stacked against me.

I had done the work. I had paid every cost, and I was standing in the place that work had built, and that place was real and mine and not a rehearsal. Was I ready?

I thought of every time I had been told I was not enough. Every door made slightly harder for me to open. Every room that contracted when I walked into it.

Every version of this moment I had rehearsed alone in the silence of my old room, believing I would never actually stand in it, telling myself the rehearsal was the only version I was going to get.

"I think so." The words came out quieter than I had planned, which was not how I had intended to enter this conversation.

Draven tilted my chin up with two fingers and made me meet his eyes. There was no flinching from the directness of them. "You don't need to be perfect, Isla. Just be you."

I searched his face. The habit of a woman who has been handed enough false reassurances to know what they feel like — you find the seam if you look for it.

There was no seam. No doubt dressed as certainty. No hesitation dressed as confidence.

Draven, the Alpha who had not once softened his standards for anyone, was looking at me as if the argument about my presence had been settled in my favor.

He believed in me. That was a sentence I had no framework for, and I was going to have to build one.

"The Moon Goddess brought you to me for a reason," he murmured, and

the certainty in his voice was not the certainty of a man who has decided to believe a convenient story.

A thing moved in my chest that I did not have a clean word for. I had spent my life being told my existence was an inconvenience, a mistake, a space in a room that should have been empty.

I had carried that story through three territories and an arena and four days of unconsciousness. I had run from it and survived it and stood far enough from it to finally see its edges.

And now this man, who had built a reputation on precision and certainty, was speaking as if my being here had always been fate and not an accident of survival.

I swallowed past the tightness in my throat, and the question came out before I had decided to ask it. "And what reason is that?"

"Come." His voice dropped to the register he used when he was not making a request. He offered his arm and I took it, and the gesture felt like a commitment from both of us.

We walked back through the garden archway. The packhouse doors swung open ahead of us, the warm light spilling across the stone threshold.

Gathered warriors at the perimeter, elders in ceremonial positions, every wolf in Crimson Fang assembled and still.

I lifted my chin and put the full weight of my spine behind it, the posture I had been building for months, the one that said I was not leaving.

I had survived worse rooms than this. I had stood in an arena with a trained fighter and I had not gone down. I had shifted under the

moon in front of all of them and given them the answer they had been withholding their verdict for.

I walked through the door with my chin at the angle that said I had every right to be here, because I had paid for that right in the specific currency this pack understood: blood and endurance and not staying down.

The moment I crossed the threshold, a ripple moved through the hall. Not sound. Not words. Movement — a wave of it, beginning at the front and traveling backward through the room.

One by one, beginning at the front and moving backward through the room, the wolves of Crimson Fang bowed.

My breath hitched, not because it surprised me. Because it did not, and the fact that it did not was the thing that stopped my breath instead.

They were acknowledging me. Not as an outsider. Not as the rogue who had survived by luck. Not as the woman who fought her way to a title she was not certain she deserved.

As their Luna. Their Luna, and it was real, and it was mine, and it was not going to be taken from me.

Draven glanced down at me, his gaze carrying the quality it had on the nights when he did not compose his expression — the version that I had been the only one to see. "This is your pack now," he murmured.

I exhaled slowly, letting the air out all the way. The ground was mine. It had always been going to be mine.

The only question had been how long it would take me to make the world confirm it, and the world had run out of arguments.

I stood in the hall with the weight of every wolf's attention on my shoulders, and I held it.

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

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