

The Chosen Luna: Alpha's Unwanted Daughter

Chapter 4

POV: Isla

The forest swallowed me whole the moment I crossed the packhouse boundary, and I let it.

Midnight Crest's territory fell away behind me, and the trees closed in, dense and indifferent.

My boots found the ground without sound. I moved fast and low, Lira a steady current at the base of my mind, pushing forward when the weight of the last two days tried to drag at my heels.

Mask our scent, I told her, and felt her power move through me in a slow wave, layering the forest floor and cold night air over whatever I carried.

It would not hold at close range. But a patrol sweeping wide through the dark, moving fast rather than carefully, would pass us by.

I had been running for two hours when the trees changed. The undergrowth thickened, the canopy closed out the moon, and the air turned denser. Watched.

The boundary markers of Crimson Fang territory were not posted in wood and stone. They lived in the earth itself, in the way the forest stopped welcoming passage and began merely permitting it.

Every wolf within a three-territory radius knew about Draven. The stories ran the length of every boundary warning ever given to a pup about leaving pack land. Ruthless. No mercy extended to rogues.

I crossed anyway. Dead certain and dead were two different conditions, and I had not survived everything in the last two days to confuse them now.

The rustle came from my left before I could place the direction. I had half a second to register the shift of air, and then the arm caught me from behind, heavy and fast, and the ground hit my knees before I had finished deciding to fight.

"Look what we have here." The voice came from directly above me, low and satisfied.

I kept my face down, hands visible, and breathed through my nose. Three wolves.

I catalogued them by scent without lifting my eyes — iron, pine resin, and the hard sweat of a patrol that had been running. They had been tracking me for at least a quarter mile.

A hand closed around my arm and hauled me upright. The wolf in front of me was broad-faced and satisfied, the grin of someone who had found exactly what they were hoping for on a dull watch rotation.

"Midnight Crest." He had clocked my scent through Lira's veil, or caught the trace before she had fully built it. "You lost, sweetheart?"

"I am a rogue," I said. Flat and quiet. Not a performance of calm but the real thing, because panic was a scent and I would not give them that. "I have nowhere else to go."

The lead wolf looked me over with the assessment of someone evaluating livestock at a market. "What kind of rogue crosses into Crimson Fang at midnight?"

He did not wait for the answer. He jerked me forward by the arm, the other two falling into position on either side, and we moved deeper into the trees.

The forest pressed in and went colder. The canopy swallowed the last of the moonlight and we moved by the ambient dark and the patrol wolves' familiarity with the ground.

I counted my steps, noted the incline, and memorized the angle of the wind. If I needed to run, I needed more than panic to run on.

The trees opened into a clearing. The patrol wolves slowed without being told, and I understood why before I had finished taking in the scene.

He stood at the far edge of the clearing, and everything around him had arranged itself accordingly without being told to.

Broad through the shoulders, carrying a stillness that was not passive but controlled, chosen, the bearing of a wolf who had never needed to establish dominance because it had never been in question.

Dark eyes moved to me the instant the patrol brought me into the open, fast and precise. He was not the kind of wolf who waited for things to enter his attention. Things came to it.

I kept my face up, my scent locked down, and I met his gaze across the open ground. Looking away would have been an admission of weakness. I had not come this far to hand that over in the first ten seconds.

"What is this?" His voice was low, unhurried, and carried without effort. "A rogue?"

The lead patrol wolf shoved me forward a step. "Caught her crossing the east boundary, Draven. Claims she has nowhere else to go."

"Let's do what we do with rogues then" He moved towards me with predatory eyes.

Then something split open in my chest — a line of heat, gold and violent, tearing from my sternum outward through my blood, crossing the open ground between us like it had already decided.

I watched it hit him. His breath stopped. One full second, his whole body locked, the same heat moving visibly up his throat, into his jaw.

His eyes found mine. Different now. Still dangerous — but underneath that, something raw and completely unwilling.

Lira went still inside me. But then "Mine." And neither of us moved.

Draven held my gaze. He did not look away to address his patrol, did not scan for weapons.

He was reading my face, my stance, the specific texture of my stillness, and the intelligence of it was more unnerving than any physical threat in the clearing.

He moved toward me, one step then another, slow and unhurried. He closed half the distance and stopped. The patrol wolves went still without being told.

He was taller than I had calculated from across the clearing, and broader. The authority he carried was not performed. It was structural, built into the way he occupied ground.

"A rogue," he turned the word over, testing its fit against what was in front of him, and found it wanting.

His eyes moved across my face and stopped on the crescent mark on my cheek, and the line of his expression shifted, almost too fast to read. "In my territory."

"I had no other option available to me," I said. "I am not a threat to this pack or anyone in it."

"Every rogue who has ever stood where you are standing has said exactly that." He took one more step. Four feet of open air between us.

I could register him now, beneath the patrol noise — dense, dark, unmistakably Alpha. Lira moved at the base of my mind in a way I did not have time to examine. "Most of them were wrong."

"I am not most of them." I held his gaze across the open ground and did not look away to soften it.

"No." His eyes had not left mine. "You are not." He studied me for a long moment with that unnerving, unhurried attention, then tilted his chin at the patrol. "Watch her."

The lead patrol wolf stepped forward and took up a position at my left shoulder.

Draven's gaze came back to mine one last time before he spoke, dropping to a register that arrived in the space between us rather than in the open air.

"You have one minute to convince me why I should not kill you where you stand right now."