

The Chosen Luna: Alpha's Unwanted Daughter

Chapter 5

POV: Isla

The minute was not a negotiation. It was a countdown, and he wanted me to feel every second of it.

I lifted my chin and held his gaze. "I am a rogue. I have been traveling alone, and I am here because there is no other territory left open to me." I kept my hands loose at my sides. "I am not a threat to Crimson Fang."

"Your name." The question landed without preamble, and he waited as though he had all the time available.

"Isla." I gave him nothing else with it, and held still to see what he did with so little.

His eyes did not change, but the quality of his attention sharpened into precision, a near-imperceptible tightening that told me the name had landed with recognition behind it.

"Isla." He said it back slowly. Not a greeting. A filing. "And you expect me to believe you chose this pack, of all territories, without motive."

"I chose it because it was the only boundary I could reach before dawn." I held the answer simple and flat. "That is the full extent of my strategy."

The silence he gave me after that was thick and deliberate. He studied my face with the patience of someone who had broken more complicated lies than mine, and the weight of it took effort to stand under without shifting my footing.

He gave one short nod. "You stay," he said. "For now." His voice carried the gravity of a closed door. "But hear me clearly, Isla. If I find one reason to doubt what you have told me, there will be no border left that can protect you."

The lead wolf moved to my shoulder. Relief was the wrong word for what moved through me — closer to a blade stopping one inch from skin.

I was still in the clearing. The eyes of every wolf tracked across me with open suspicion, and I understood without being told that provisional tolerance was the ceiling of what I could expect here.

Draven had not finished with me. He turned back, and the calculated distance he had maintained across the clearing collapsed.

He closed the remaining space between us with three unhurried steps, and I did not move back, because moving back was information I was not prepared to give him.

"If you want to remain in this pack," he said, voice dropped low, shaped only for the two of us, "you will earn it."

"Tell me how," I said. The question was genuine. The steadiness in my voice was work.

He studied me for a moment with those unreadable dark eyes. Then he reached up and brushed a loose strand of hair back from my face, fingers slow and deliberate, lingering at my jaw.

Not affection. An assessment of what I would do when he moved into my space uninvited.

I did not pull away. I did not lean in. I stood exactly where I was and let him read whatever he found in that.

"You are shaking," he said. The observation was delivered without heat, almost clinical in its precision.

"No." I held my ground as I said it. "I am cold. There is a considerable difference between the two."

He tilted his head, reading the answer. His thumb traced the edge of my cheekbone, unhurried. "You told me you are not afraid of me."

"I told you the truth," I said, and kept my eyes level on his when I did. "I have not stopped telling it."

"Then why," his hand dropped to my jaw, fingers light, barely pressure at all, his gaze moving across my face with infuriating thoroughness, "does your pulse say otherwise?"

I could feel it. My own heartbeat, faster than I wanted, louder than the silence between us, a physical betrayal I had no mechanism to suppress. He could hear it. His hearing was better than mine and we both knew it.

"My pulse," I said, "has been elevated since your patrol put me on the ground. That is not specific to you."

His thumb stilled on my jaw. For a long beat he said nothing. The space between our faces was close enough that I could register the warmth radiating off his skin.

The dense, wild scent that marked him as Alpha reached me before I had finished deciding how to process it. Lira stirred at the base of my mind with an awareness I pushed back down immediately.

Not here, not in this clearing, not with his patrol positioned at the edges of it reading every shift of my expression.

His gaze dropped to my mouth, held there for a deliberate moment, then came back to my eyes.

"You fight well for a rogue," he said quietly. "You hold your ground. You are lying about who you are, and you are doing it competently."

His fingers released my jaw and he straightened. "That means you are either very practiced at deception, or you have been surviving in conditions that required it."

"The second," I said. I held his gaze across the remaining distance between us and did not look away.

"I know." He held my gaze, and the weight in it was not unkind, which made it more unsettling than hostility would have been.

"A rogue with trained composure. No visible pack markings. A crescent birthmark that the old texts associate with a lineage considerably older than anything running in this territory." He paused. "Who are you, Isla."

Not a question. He held the space open and waited, watching my face for what I would do with it.

"No one who will cause trouble for this pack," I said. "That is all I am willing to offer you right now."

His eyes held mine for four seconds. Five. Long enough that I could feel the patrol wolves reading the exchange from their positions around the clearing.

Then his expression shifted into a focused, contained interest I had not anticipated — the look of someone who has found a problem far more engaging than the one they expected.

"Prove it," he said, and moved.

One step. Two. No pause, no warning, until the space I had been defending for an hour simply ceased to exist.

I stepped back. The tree line caught my shoulders. He planted one hand against the bark beside my head and stayed there, close enough that the warmth of his chest reached me before any rational thought did.

His free hand came up, two fingers tracing the line of my jaw. Slow. Barely contact.

"Don't." The word left me before I'd finished forming it.

"Don't what." Not a question. His thumb found my pulse point and rested there. "I haven't done anything."

He was right. That was the problem.

"I haven't —" I stopped. Started again. The words came out against every piece of judgment I had. "I'm a virgin."

Silence. The corner of his mouth pulled. Slight and precise and completely deliberate.

"Whoever he was," Draven said quietly, "he had you long enough to call you his." His gaze dropped once to my mouth, then came back up. "And he still couldn't make you want him enough."

He leaned in until his lips nearly grazed my ear.

"That is not your failure," he said. "That is his."

He stepped back and turned away with the ease of someone who had just taken every piece of ground I had left.

"Dawn," he said. "You start earning your place here."

He did not look back.