

The Chosen Luna: Alpha's Unwanted Daughter

Chapter 6

POV: Isla

Three days in Crimson Fang, and I had already mapped every exit in the building.

I knew the corridors, the gate rotations, the twelve-minute gap in the eastern patrol changeover. None of that was effort. It was reflex, the same skill set I had built surviving Midnight Crest, transferred intact.

Jamie watched me do it anyway, then planted himself as my sparring partner on the second morning without asking permission — wraps on his fists, that particular grin that said consequences had never once changed his calculations.

He was Draven's royal guard. That should have built distance between us. Instead he threw combinations at full force and called it a warm welcome.

"You are tougher than you look," he said, ducking the cross I threw, barely — it grazed his jaw — and came back up grinning harder. "Did not think a rogue could move like that."

I dropped my hands. Looked at him straight. "Then why not just kill me. Would have saved everyone the trouble."

Draven's voice crossed the yard before Jamie could answer, low and carrying without effort.

"Quick death is a mercy." His eyes were already on me when I looked up. "I am not merciful."

The yard absorbed it. Nobody moved. I turned back to Jamie and reset my stance.

"Keep underestimating me," I said, resetting my stance. "I have always found it more useful than respect."

Susan ran the yard from its edge, arms crossed, gaze moving in clean arcs across every sparring pair. Draven's beta, sharp-eyed and deliberate.

She had not spoken directly to me since my arrival. Every time her eyes crossed mine the message was clear: I see you, and I have not decided what to do about it.

Draven stood at the far end of the yard with two senior warriors, but he was not working with them. He was watching me.

Every time I looked up, his gaze was already there. Level. Patient. The focused attention of a wolf accumulating evidence.

When Jamie and I finally broke apart, Draven crossed the yard. The two warriors stayed where they were. They read the air and made the correct call.

"Not bad for a rogue." His eyes moved between Jamie and me, already running calculations. "Your footwork is clean."

"She nearly took my jaw off." Jamie touched the spot, still grinning. "Just so you have the full picture."

Draven's gaze settled on my face and stayed. "Where did you learn to fight like that."

Not a question. A door he had wrenched open and was holding with both hands, waiting to see if I would walk through it.

"You learn what you need to learn when no pack is watching your back." I kept my voice even, my breathing controlled.

Every skill I showed him was another brick removed from the wall I was building. "Survival is a patient teacher."

"Survival does not teach structured combinations." One step closer, his voice dropped, not for privacy, for precision alone. "An Alpha's daughter would train exactly the way you just trained."

The yard had gone quieter around us. The pretense of other work had dissolved entirely, without anyone acknowledging it had.

"That." I held his stare across the open yard. "That is how rogues who want to keep breathing learn to fight. Nothing more."

His eyes dropped to the base of my throat for one second and then back up. He had heard my pulse and he was letting me know it, letting the knowledge sit between us in the open air, unaddressed.

He stepped back. Not retreat. Permission, extended on his terms, revocable at any time.

The look he left behind was not a conclusion. It had teeth, and it was patient, and it was waiting.

That night I wore the floor down pacing. Three raps on the door cut through it. Sharp with no preamble.

I had been cataloguing the yard exchange, running the gaps, trying to locate where I had given too much. The knock cut through all of it.

I opened it to find Draven in the corridor, expression unreadable, the authority around him operating as its own territory.

"Come with me." He was already moving, already through the threshold before I had formed a response.

I followed because my options were narrower than the corridor.

He moved without once checking whether I was behind him. He already knew I was, and we both understood what that said.

His quarters were at the building's far end. Low candles, shadows in the corners, the smell of pine resin and wolf and authority.

He opened the door and stepped aside, and I entered, and he closed the door behind us with a sound that did not need to be loud to be final.

He faced me from across the room. Arms loose at his sides, back straight, the absolute absence of performance that is more unnerving than aggression would have been.

"I want to know who you are." No preamble, no positioning. "Not the rogue. Not the story. Who you are."

I kept my arms at my sides and my spine straight. "I have told you everything there is to tell."

"You have told me a category." He crossed the room, unhurried, those same four steps from the yard, and stopped close enough that I had a choice to make about my feet.

I kept them where they were. "Categories are what people offer when they do not want to give you the thing underneath."

"Then what is this actually about, Draven." Not a question either. A direct challenge, and I held my ground behind it.

A pause long enough to be its own answer. Then, flat and direct, without wrapping:

"You." His eyes stayed on mine, completely steady. "In my bed. That is what I want."

The words arrived without a wrapper. My hand moved before the sentence finished. The crack of it against his face filled the room, sharp and clean, and the echo took a long time to settle.

He did not step back. His head turned with the impact and returned. His eyes were dark and entirely steady.

"I am not available for that." Every muscle in my body was braced and I held that too.

"I know." His voice dropped a register. His hand came up, thumb to the line of my jaw, not gripping, stating. "You carry yourself like someone who has never once believed she was ordinary."

His gaze moved across my face with the thoroughness of a second read, hunting what the first pass missed. "The crescent mark. The fighting. The way you hold position when afraid." His thumb did not move. "None of that belongs to a wolf without a name."

He leaned in until his mouth was close to my ear, his voice private, beneath carrying distance.

"You are hiding, and you are doing it well. But the crescent mark and the way you fight and the way you hold your ground under pressure do not belong to a wolf without a name."

His breath was warm against the side of my face. "Care to stop performing and start talking?"

I held his gaze across the distance between us and gave him nothing, and kept my breathing even while I did it.

The silence deepened, acquired weight, became its own kind of pressure. And Draven did not move, and did not blink, and did not give me the relief of looking away.