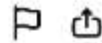




Chapter 10



POV: Draven

"Maybe I can help?" The words arrived before the decision did, which was the first problem of the night.

That was the problem. Everything with Isla arrived before the decision — the watching, the noticing, the quality of attention I had not extended to anything in years.

I had been running this pack on precision since I was twenty-three. Eight days. One unshifted rogue. The gap between instinct and choice had dissolved, and she had not even appeared to try.

She was looking at me. Her lip caught between her teeth, her breath uneven, her body fighting itself in a way that did nothing good for my composure.

The heat coming off her was not subtle. It met the air between us as an established condition, and every cell in my body had registered it the moment I stepped through her door.

She should have shoved me back. I had expected her to. She had slapped me three nights ago and held her ground through every pressure I had applied since.

Some part of me had been counting on that response — on Isla's refusal, the specific resistance she brought to every interaction with me that kept the situation from becoming one I had to examine.

She did not shove me back, and the fact of that landed in my chest before my brain had finished processing it.

My fingers found her chin and tilted it up, and she let me, and the heat between us compacted into a dense, specific pressure.

A mere inch separated our mouths. Her breath mixed with mine. Her pulse was hammering in a way I could hear clearly, and my own pulse was running ahead of any instruction I had given it.

A soft sound left her. Barely audible. Not quite a word and not quite surrender, the exact sound of someone losing a negotiation they were trying not to acknowledge having entered.

Then the knock arrived. Three strikes against the door, sharp enough to carry through stone and decision both.

"Alpha." Aldric's voice, muffled through the door. "The elders want to talk to you."

My body locked. I ran the clinical sequence: Isla's proximity, the inch of air still between us, the fact that I had not moved.

Aldric was going to knock again in approximately four seconds. The delay was going to register with every patrol wolf in the corridor.

My thumb brushed her jaw before I pulled back, and I felt her breath hitch against it. That sound was going to cause me problems.

I stepped back and put the decision between us where the proximity had been, which was the only honest thing I did that night.

I exhaled once, quietly, and crossed to the door and opened it without looking at her again, because looking at her again was not information I

needed and it would not have helped either of us.

Aldric stood in the corridor with the expression of a man who had excellent instincts and was deploying all of them in the direction of the far wall.

"The council chamber." My voice carried no further than Aldric needed. "Ten minutes."

I did not look back at the room. What was in it was not information I needed right now, and I was not going to make that mistake twice in one night.

The council chamber smelled of pine resin and old authority, the combination men use when they want their objections to seem inevitable rather than personal.

The elders were already seated in their half-circle when I arrived. They had been there long enough to generate an agenda. This had been organized, not spontaneous.

I took my position at the head of the room, let my gaze move across each of them once, and waited.

Elder Morvin spoke first. He always spoke first; it was his primary qualification for the position.

"The rogue." Morvin folded his hands on the table. "The pack requires clarity on her status."

"She can be trained." I kept my gaze on Morvin. "She helps with chores. She is an asset."

One of the younger elders scoffed on cue. "We've got enough Omegas for

that."

"Then we'll train her to fight." I kept my voice level, my gaze on Morvin.

"She is capable of it. She demonstrated that in the training yard."

Morvin folded his hands. He was a careful man, which was why he had lasted. "You're known for executing rogues, Alpha. Why spare this one?"

The room waited, carefully, behind still faces.

There were several answers, all of them true and none of them sufficient. She is useful. She is strong. She is hiding who she is, which means she is someone worth finding out.

Her crescent mark appears in texts I have read three times and cannot stop returning to.

What I gave them was the answer that would hold the room, not the ones that were true.

"Are you questioning my decision, Elder Morvin?" The weight went into the words at the right register — not loud, not hot, but cold in the way that closes rooms.

"I decide who lives and dies in Crimson Fang. Not the council. Not precedent. Me."

The air changed in the specific way it always changes when everyone in a room remembers the same thing at the same time.

"She will be trained to serve this pack," I continued, scanning the semi-circle. "On the battlefield or elsewhere. If anyone objects, speak now."

No one spoke. No one in that room was going to challenge me on this, and we all three knew it.

I let the silence hold for three additional seconds, long enough to be certain and short enough not to perform, then I delivered the thing that would end the session and send a shockwave through every conversation in the packhouse by morning.

"I'm making Isla my chosen Luna." Flat and final. A closed decision, not a proposal. "She will bear me an heir. She's not leaving this pack."

Morvin was on his feet before the echo died. "An unshifted rogue. You would hand her a title wolves in this pack have bled for—"

"Sit down."

He did not sit down. Two of the younger elders were already talking over him, voices colliding, the chamber coming apart at its careful seams.

I let it run for three seconds. Then I cut through it the way you cut through anything — cleanly, without raising my voice.

"If anyone objects, speak now."

The room went silent. Morvin sat down.

I left the council chamber before the silence broke. The decision was made. The announcement would distribute itself through the pack by morning without any additional effort from me.

Outside in the corridor, the packhouse had gone to its nighttime quiet. I stood in it for a moment.

I thought about Isla, alone in a room that was not hers, in a pack that had not accepted her, carrying a past I had not mapped and a name I was increasingly certain she had not given me.

I thought about the inch of air between us, and what I had stepped away

I thought about the inch of air between us, and what I had stepped away from, and why.

I knew the 'why.' It was not restraint. It was recognition, the specific caution that arrives when you have located a thing worth not rushing.

I turned down the corridor toward my quarters and walked without hurrying, which took more control than the council session had.

Isla was not leaving this pack. And I was going to need to know who she actually was before I let anything else happen between us.

Because she was going to be Luna of Crimson Fang, and Lunas of Crimson Fang did not arrive without names.

Let's see how tough little Rogue is.

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

Chapter 10



Comments

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Gifts

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