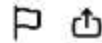




Chapter 11



POV: Isla

I dreamed of him. Not a dream but a visceral ambush that clawed through sleep and left me gasping, body soaked, sheets twisted around my legs.

Draven, filling every corner of the dream with a presence that refused to leave with waking.

His hands were rough and calloused and possessive, as if he had spent a lifetime carving his will into everything within reach.

His voice was a dark, guttural sound that moved through bone rather than air, promising things that made me press my thighs together and hate myself for it.

His weight pinning me down. His mouth was at my throat. His hips driving into me with a rhythm that had nothing measured about it and did not intend to.

I woke up with my hands fisted in the sheets, my pulse hammering in the wrong places, the dream still sitting in my chest refusing to clear.

My breath was wrong. My skin was fever-hot and wet with sweat and the ache between my legs was specific and real and furious, and I lay in the dark with it and felt my own body positioned against me, sides switched without notice or consultation.

The dream sat on my chest and refused to leave. It wrapped itself around

my breath, my pulse, the back of my throat, and made itself at home, and I lay there and hated it. Hated him. Hated the specific architecture of my own want.

I had survived Garrick. I had survived Midnight Crest and a three-territory crossing in the dark and eight days of a pack that wanted me gone.

I had held my ground in a clearing when every survival instinct said to run. I had held it in his quarters when he had put his hands on me, and I was not going to be undone by a dream.

I was not going to be undone by a dream I had not chosen. I was not going to give my own sleeping mind that kind of authority.

I told myself this until the dark outside the window began to go grey, and then I got up and I dressed and I went to the training yard before anyone else was awake, and I hit the post until my knuckles bled, and that was better.

That night the knock came, and I was already at the door before the second strike landed, because I knew the weight of it.

I knew who it was before my hand touched the door. The specific weight of it — three strikes, unhurried, the knock of someone who does not consider the possibility that you will not open.

Draven stood in the dim light of the corridor, his expression unreadable, his frame filling the doorway in the way it always did, as though the architecture had been built around him and the rest of us were making do with the margins.

"Come with me." Low and commanding. The tone that did not carry a

question inside it.

It was not a request. I already knew it was not a request, and I followed anyway, because my options in that corridor were what they always were, limited and known and accounted for.

Through the dark, twisting corridors that smelled of pine resin and pack and a wildness underneath that had no clean name.

Up the narrow staircase that announced every step. Deeper into the packhouse, into the part of it that belonged to him.

His quarters were larger than I had expected and darker, the air thick with his scent, leather and sweat and wild and authority, layered so deep into the room that breathing it was like reading a document that had not been written for my eyes.

I stepped inside and heard the door close behind me with a sound that settled with finality.

"What do you need from me?" The question left my mouth before I had arranged it. His eyes found me in the low light the way they always did, immediately, with a precision that bypassed consideration.

I had not registered what I was wearing until his gaze moved over me with that deliberate, consuming attention. The thin gown I had pulled on without thinking was not offering me anything in the way of advantage.

I crossed my arms over my chest. The hem rode further up. I did not look down, and I did not move my arms.

"You know everyone here wants to either kick you out, or have you executed." His voice was low, that particular register he used when a room had been reduced to the two of us.

"But I won't do any of that." He took a pause, unhurried. "For now."

"Why?" I held my ground, arms still crossed, my chin at the angle I had learned to maintain when the cost of dropping it was too high. "You don't even like me."

His eyes moved from mine to my mouth to the pulse at the base of my throat, and the route they took was not accidental. "Oh, I never said that," he murmured.

For one second, pulse hammering, I thought he would cross the remaining ground between us and I would let him.

For one second, I wanted him to.

His lips brushed mine. Slow and deliberate. A single point of contact that sent heat through my veins and made a sound leave my throat that I did not sanction and could not take back.

He pulled back and the distance between us returned, and I was still trying to locate my breath.

His smirk returned as he put distance between us, unhurried, satisfied with whatever he had found.

He left me standing in the wreckage of my own pulse, breathless and incandescent with a fury I could not entirely account for.

"Make yourself useful, little rogue." The mockery in it was precision-placed, delivered clean.

"I won't sleep with you." The words came out fractured, with a stutter at the front of them, and my body immediately staged a protest against the position I had just taken, which was humiliating. "I won't."

"We'll see about that." He turned toward the door, unhurried, as though the conversation had simply concluded on his timeline.

"Go back to your room. The elders will summon you tomorrow. I thought you should have a heads up before that."

The pivot was so clean it took me a second to catch up to it. "Why? What did I do?"

Draven paused at the door and turned back once, and the smirk was still exactly where it had been.

"You'll find out tomorrow." He turned and left, and the smirk was still on his face when he did.

I stood in his quarters alone, my pulse still wrong and my gown still thin and the dream still sitting in the back of my throat, and I stared at the closed door and I breathed through it.

I was enough. I had always been enough, even when everything around me worked to prove otherwise.

But tonight that truth needed more work than usual to hold its shape, and I noticed that too, and I filed it where it belonged.

I left his quarters and walked back through the dark corridors to my room. I did not run. I did not look behind me. In the morning I would find out what the elders wanted.

One problem at a time — that was the only framework that had ever kept me functional, and I was not going to abandon it now.

End *of*

