



## Chapter 14



POV: Draven

I should have stopped it. That had been settled before the council session ended, and the settling had changed nothing, and I had been on this balcony turning it over ever since.

I stood above the training yard, jaw set, hands loose at my sides, staring at the tree line. The cold air was doing nothing useful.

She was in the packhouse without a shifted wolf and tomorrow morning Tyla Morvin was going to try to kill her. I had made the move that put her there. The move had been correct, and I still hated it.

I could have pulled the invocation. One word to Morvin and another way would have been found. I had not done it because I needed to see what she would do when the ground dropped out from under her.

She had taken the trial without blinking. Now I was standing in the cold knowing what she was made of, and that knowledge had not given me what I had expected.

My father held this pack for twenty-two years before a border skirmish took him at fifty-one. I was twenty-three. Unprepared. Crimson Fang did not wait for readiness.

The elders had been patient with me in the early years. Patient, and watching, and building a file. By twenty-six they had begun presenting Luna candidates with the quiet persistence of men who believe they are being helpful.

being helpful.

By thirty the persistence had a name: Tyla Morvin. Elder Morvin's niece. Trained for the role since adolescence, formidable by every measurable standard, loyal to the pack above everything else.

She was everything the council wanted in a Luna. I had been declining her for four years with diminishing courtesy.

And then I had stood in that chamber and named a rogue with no pack and no name the room could verify, and Morvin's fury had been a specific, personal thing.

Morvin's face when I said Isla's name had been worth the political cost, and I knew it, and I did not regret it.

But that satisfaction was not most of it, and I was honest enough with myself to know what the rest of it was.

A knock behind me, sharp and deliberate, one strike with the cadence of someone who has made the decision before they lift their hand. I did not turn.

"You are brooding." Susan stepped onto the balcony and her voice had the particular economy she deployed when she already had her conclusion.

"I do not brood." I exhaled through my nose and kept my eyes on the tree line. It had nothing useful to offer.

She settled against the railing at my left, arms crossed, and read the silence with the accuracy she had been building for six years. "You are thinking about her."

Nothing from me. Susan had the floor and six years of experience reading what I did not offer, and she was using both.

"She will not survive." Her voice dropped a register, the particular softness she used when delivering a verdict she did not enjoy. "Not without shifting."

"She is stronger than you think." The edge in my own voice arrived without invitation.

Susan studied the side of my face for a long moment, reading it with the efficiency of someone who has had six years to develop the skill.

Then she shook her head with the patience of someone delivering a message they do not expect to land but have delivered regardless. "If you care what happens to her, tell her that yourself."

The balcony went quiet after that and Susan went inside. I stood in the cold until it stopped being useful, and then I walked to Isla's door.

Closed. I stood before it for a moment I would not account for later. One knock.

A pause that stretched long enough to carry its own weight, and then longer than that, while I stood in the corridor and did not examine what I was doing there.

The door opened, and the light from her room reached the corridor before she did.

She stood in the frame with her arms crossed and her expression assembled into readiness — a harder layer underneath the confusion, and she did not ask why I was there. She had already understood that the answer did not matter.

I leaned against the frame and let my gaze settle on her. I was looking for a specific thing and I did not find it.

No fear worth noting. No doubt she was wearing it openly. No sign that she had spent the last two hours in the same deteriorating calculation I had been running on the balcony.

What I found was Isla, which was its own category and which was, at this particular moment, deeply unhelpful.

"You should sleep." The words arrived and I recognized them as the inadequate opening they were.

She lifted a brow and held it with all the patience in the world. "You came here to tell me that?"

Amusement moved across my face before I had sanctioned it. "No." I stepped inside. Closed the door.

The air changed the way it always changed when the space between us reduced to only what we chose to maintain.

She should have stepped back. Anyone with any self-preservation instinct would have stepped back.

She did not, and the fact of that registered in the room, audible in the way silence can be audible.

I reached out and ran my fingers down her arm — slow, deliberate, a question and a test and a warning folded into the same motion. Her breath caught.

She should have pulled away. She did not do that either, and the gap between what she should have done and what she did struck at my

composure in a way I was not prepared to examine.

I let my hand drop. I studied her face. The slight part of her lips. The tremble at her throat she was working to suppress, the effort visible behind the stillness — I noted both things, the tremble and the suppression, and filed them where they belonged.

Tomorrow she might die, and I had put her in the position that made that possible, and that sat with more weight than it had any business sitting with.

"One word from you, and it is over." Low and aimed. "Tell me to stop it, and I will. Say the word, and you will not have to fight."

I meant it. I would dismantle what needed to be dismantled. I would make the elders stand down through whatever mechanism was available, and there was always a mechanism.

She stared at me across the remaining space between us and the silence had its own shape.

Then she shook her head. Once, slow, the motion deliberate and certain, and she did not look away when she did it.

I had known she would. I had come here knowing she would. The offer had needed to be made regardless.

I closed the distance until she had to tilt her chin to hold my gaze, and I held the look for a moment that had no practical purpose.

"Do not die tomorrow." Low and unhurried. Not a command. Both of us understood the register it occupied.

Then I left before she could answer, because whatever she answered was

Then I left before she could answer, because whatever she answered was going to make what I was already carrying considerably heavier, and I had a pack to run in the morning and a trial to witness and work to do.

Which meant I had work to do, and I was going to do it, and I was going to stop thinking about the way she did not step back.

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

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Comments

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Gifts

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