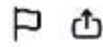




Chapter 34



POV: Draven

I had never been a man prone to panic.

Many years of leading this pack had built a particular discipline into my bones.

The capacity to hold the mind level when the body was already moving. To read a situation in the half-second before it became irreversible, and act from clarity rather than instinct alone.

But the unease settling in my chest right now had been there for two full minutes, and it would not be reasoned away.

My eyes moved through the crowd, cutting past the gathered wolves, the draped tables, the candlelight that had made the hall feel, an hour ago, ordered.

I was searching for one specific thing. The soft weight of her gravity. The silver of her gown. The precise quiet she carried into any space she occupied.

I had left Isla among the elders not ten minutes past. Her expression unreadable, her posture contained, the way she went when working through a thought she had not yet chosen to share. I had read it as composure.

I had told myself I would return to her once I finished with the border scouts.

Now the space where she had stood held other wolves, and none of them had noticed her absence because they had never truly noticed her presence.

My fingers flexed at my sides, the only outward sign of anything I had not yet decided to act on.

I tried the logic. She had stepped away for air. She had gone ahead to change before the culmination. She was still in this hall and I had simply not found the right angle.

My stomach turned over and kept moving in the direction logic had failed to account for.

No. She would not move without telling me. Not tonight, not after the past week had cost both of us what it had.

The woman who had stopped flinching when I entered a room, who had spent three days asking questions about this pack with the focused intent of a wolf genuinely learning it rather than enduring it — that woman did not vanish without a word.

Every instinct built across two decades of command said: wrong. Clearly. Without room for argument.

"Isla." Her name left my mouth controlled, pitched to carry over the music without cracking the surface of the evening. Several heads turned.

Nothing.

My jaw locked. I moved forward, the cold calculation of an Alpha already working the problem.

Pack members bent their heads as I passed. Conversation dissolved in

my wake. I registered none of it.

The crowd opened before me the way it always did when I moved with this kind of purpose, and I let it fall behind without slowing.

Where was she?

Then I caught Susan near the far corridor entrance. Already scanning. Already alert.

Her expression carrying the same rapid recalculation I could feel moving through me.

She had spent the past several days with Isla, building the bridge between a new role and a woman still finding her footing in it.

I covered the distance in six strides. "Susan." Low. Direct. "Where is Isla?"

Susan turned, her brow pulling together. "She was with you."

My nostrils flared. "Not anymore."

The understanding moved through her fast and unwilling, the way it had moved through me. Her eyes swept the hall. We arrived at the same empty answer in the same breath.

"She could've gone to her chambers," Susan offered, her tone already unconvinced. She was walking through the same logic I had exhausted, finding the same thin result at the end of it.

"I'll search the garden."

Susan hesitated. "Should I—"

"No." Hard and clipped. The register I used when the margin for

discussion had already closed. "Don't alert anyone yet. I don't want to cause panic. We just got a Luna. We're not losing her."

Her expression compressed into resolve. She understood the weight behind those words; the line between what was happening and what would be permitted to stand.

Susan gave a sharp nod and disappeared into the halls.

I held still in the center of the celebration for exactly the length of time it took to fix the order of the next steps.

Music threaded through conversation all around me. Wolves raised glasses with the ease of a pack that believed the hard part was finished. They had watched the ceremony and concluded the evening was complete.

They had not been watching closely enough. None of them had. And I had allowed that gap to remain open.

I moved through the garden door into the night. The cold arrived sharp — pine and iron on the air, and beneath that a displacement, a wrongness in the familiar pattern of the grounds that a wolf registers before the eye locates the source.

The particular silence that follows a disturbance rather than precedes one.

My chest tightened, and I did not allow myself to analyze whether it was urgency or a more personal weight that had put that tightness there.

I moved through the garden. Each path, each angle of shadow, each stretch of dark near the treeline. The perimeter held its quiet. Whatever had passed through here was already gone.

Isla had enemies I had not yet fully mapped. A sister whose patience and preparation I had underestimated once and would not underestimate again.

A new position was placed on her before she had the standing to protect it. A dozen threads I had told myself could wait until after the ceremony, until the evening was behind us.

I had left her among the elders and trusted ten minutes were safe.

I stood at the treeline and let the full weight of that sit in my chest. No deflection. No revision. Just the bare fact of it.

Then I turned back toward the packhouse.

The worst version of what was happening pressed at the edge of my composure. I did not permit it to fully form. Not yet. Not without evidence.

But the instinct did not quiet. It dropped lower, colder, more certain, the way it always did in the moment before a night revealed exactly how badly it had already gone.

I moved back through the garden door, past the gathered pack and their unbroken celebration, and I kept my face composed and my pace deliberate, because the wolves watching me needed to believe the Alpha had this in hand.

Not because the discipline had held. Because Isla needed me to find her, and panic would only slow that down.

I would find her. And then I would deal with whatever — or whoever — had taken her.

had taken her.

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

Chapter 34

